



Ethics, Technology and Human Value in a Globalized World: A Literary Reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest*

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Abstract

This chapter offers an extended doctoral-level examination of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) as a critical dystopian drama that interrogates the ethical implications of biotechnology, neoliberal globalization, and postcolonial inequality. Situating the play within late-twentieth-century Indian economic liberalization and contemporary debates on organ trafficking, surveillance capitalism, and biopolitics, the study argues that *Harvest* dramatizes the transformation of the human body into a commodified resource under global market regimes. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's theory of biopower, Donna Haraway's cyborg paradigm, Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism, Hannah Arendt's political philosophy, and postcolonial critiques of neo-imperial extraction, this chapter demonstrates how Padmanabhan exposes the structural coercion masked by the rhetoric of consent and humanitarian exchange. Through close textual analysis of key scenes—particularly the contractual agreement, corporate surveillance mechanisms, Jeetu's substitution, and Jaya's final act of defiance—the chapter argues that *Harvest* challenges liberal bioethical models grounded in autonomy by foregrounding systemic inequality. Ultimately, the play redefines human value not as biological utility but as ethical agency. In an era marked by medical tourism, genetic commodification, and data surveillance, *Harvest* remains urgently relevant as a theatrical meditation on dignity, technology, and justice in a globalized world.

Key Words: Biopower; Globalization; Organ Trade; Postcolonialism; Cyberfeminism; Surveillance Capitalism; Bioethics; Neoliberalism; Dystopian Drama; Human Dignity.

Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* emerges at a crucial historical moment—the decade of India's economic liberalization and the rapid expansion of global biomedical markets. The play imagines a near-future Mumbai in which impoverished citizens sell their organs to wealthy Western recipients through the corporation InterPlanta Services. While the premise appears speculative, it draws upon already existing realities of organ trade and medical tourism. The dystopian framework does not distance the audience from contemporary ethical crises; rather, it intensifies them.

From the opening exchange, economic precarity frames the narrative. Om's announcement that he has secured employment is initially met with relief, only to be revealed as a contract to donate organs. He reassures his family that it is merely a "formality," insisting that nothing will be taken immediately (Padmanabhan 8). The irony is immediate: the language of reassurance conceals systemic exploitation. The body becomes collateral in a transnational economy.

Unlike traditional dystopias that depict authoritarian states, *Harvest* locates power in corporate globalization. The state is conspicuously absent. This absence is itself significant, signaling the privatization of governance and the rise of market rationality as the dominant organizing principle of life.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) remains one of the most penetrating dramatic meditations on globalization and biotechnology in postcolonial Indian literature. Written in the aftermath of India's economic liberalization and during the acceleration of global biomedical industries, the play anticipates contemporary debates on organ trafficking, medical tourism, surveillance capitalism, and the neoliberal restructuring of human value. Although framed as speculative dystopia, *Harvest* operates less as futuristic fantasy than as a diagnostic allegory of late-capitalist modernity. By dramatizing a world in which impoverished citizens sell their organs to wealthy Western recipients through a multinational corporation, Padmanabhan exposes the ethical vacuum at the heart of technocratic globalization. The play interrogates what becomes of human dignity when the body itself is absorbed into circuits of global capital, and it asks whether consent retains meaning within systems structured by structural inequality. Through sustained attention to biopolitical governance, cybernetic mediation, gendered commodification, and postcolonial extraction, *Harvest* reveals how technological progress, when aligned with market rationality rather than justice, transforms life into inventory.

At the center of the play is Om Prakash, an unemployed man living with his wife Jaya, his mother Ma, and his brother Jeetu in a cramped Mumbai apartment. Economic desperation propels Om to sign a contract with InterPlanta Services, a corporation that matches organ donors from the global South with affluent recipients in the West. The transaction is framed as "donation," but its structure exposes the fiction of voluntariness. Om attempts to reassure his family that the agreement is merely procedural, insisting that the corporation will only take organs if necessary (Padmanabhan 8). Yet the immediate transformation of the household into a regulated biomedical environment undermines this illusion. Sanitation protocols are imposed, monitoring devices are installed, and the family's autonomy is curtailed. The apartment becomes a clinical enclosure, and Om's body becomes corporate property.

Michel Foucault's theory of biopower provides an indispensable framework for interpreting this transformation. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that modern power no longer relies primarily on spectacular punishment but instead operates through subtle mechanisms that regulate bodies and optimize them for economic productivity (Foucault 136). Biopower governs life by managing health, reproduction, and longevity. InterPlanta exemplifies such governance. It does not threaten Om with overt violence; rather, it offers economic security in exchange for compliance. Surveillance replaces coercion, and contractual consent legitimizes intrusion. Om's diet, sexual activity, and daily routines are regulated under the guise of medical care. As Foucault observes, disciplinary power creates "docile bodies" that internalize regulation (138). Om gradually accepts the corporation's authority, rationalizing its demands as necessary for his family's survival.

What makes *Harvest* particularly unsettling is the privatization of biopolitical control. There is no visible state authority. Power resides in the corporate apparatus. This absence of the state signals a shift from sovereign governance to neoliberal administration, where private entities assume regulatory functions traditionally associated with government. The corporation's

Guards function as bureaucratic enforcers, yet their authority derives not from law but from contract. The body becomes a site of privatized sovereignty. In this sense, Padmanabhan's dystopia is not totalitarian but neoliberal. The violence it depicts is diffused, bureaucratic, and sanitized.

The play's technological infrastructure deepens this biopolitical critique. Screens mediate communication between Om and his Western recipient, Ginni. Through these interfaces, Ginni surveils Om's environment, commenting on furniture placement, lighting, and Jaya's appearance. The technological gaze produces asymmetrical visibility: Om is fully exposed; Ginni remains physically absent, protected by geographic and economic distance. This asymmetry reflects what Achille Mbembe has described as necropolitical hierarchy, wherein certain populations are rendered disposable to sustain others' vitality. While *Harvest* does not explicitly invoke necropolitics, its logic is unmistakable: life expectancy in the global North is extended through the depletion of bodies in the global South.

Donna Haraway's cyborg theory offers a complementary but complicating lens. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway envisions the cyborg as a hybrid figure that dissolves boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture (Haraway 150). Such hybridity holds emancipatory potential because it destabilizes essentialist hierarchies. Yet in *Harvest*, technological hybridity reinforces rather than disrupts inequality. Om's body becomes technologically integrated into a global medical network, but this integration does not empower him. Instead, it subjects him to intensified regulation. The cyborg here is colonized rather than liberated. Padmanabhan thereby challenges techno-utopian narratives that equate connectivity with empowerment. Connectivity, in a world structured by unequal capital flows, magnifies asymmetry.

The global circulation of organs in *Harvest* mirrors historical patterns of colonial extraction. Postcolonial theorists have long argued that globalization extends rather than replaces imperial structures (Young 213). During colonial rule, raw materials flowed from colony to metropole; in Padmanabhan's dystopia, biological materials flow along similar lines. The Indian body becomes a renewable resource for Western longevity. Ginni's language underscores this entitlement. She speaks of Om's organs as though they were extensions of her own body, expressing fascination with his physical condition and even curiosity about inhabiting Jaya's sensory experience (Padmanabhan 78). The boundary between donor and recipient collapses into a grotesque intimacy that reveals the violence underlying humanitarian rhetoric.

The euphemistic language deployed by InterPlanta echoes Hannah Arendt's analysis of bureaucratic normalization. Arendt observes that modern systems of domination often rely on administrative language that masks moral violence (Arendt 287). In *Harvest*, terms such as "care," "protection," and "benefits" conceal extraction. The corporation presents itself as benevolent, promising improved living conditions and financial stability. Yet this rhetoric obscures the fundamental reality that Om's life is conditional. When Jeetu is discovered to be biologically superior, the corporation seamlessly substitutes him for Om. The shift occurs without ethical deliberation. Market efficiency overrides human bonds.

Jeetu's substitution represents one of the play's most devastating moments. His youthful health renders him more valuable in the eyes of InterPlanta. The body becomes interchangeable, evaluated through metrics of compatibility and longevity. Such interchangeability reveals the logic of commodification: individuality dissolves into biological

utility. The family's internal conflict during this crisis illustrates how neoliberal systems fracture solidarity. Ma prioritizes material security; Om oscillates between guilt and relief; Jaya experiences outrage. Economic precarity erodes moral clarity.

Gender intensifies this ethical fragmentation. Simone de Beauvoir's contention that woman is historically positioned as "Other" (Beauvoir 26) illuminates Jaya's marginalization. Although Om's organs constitute the explicit commodity, Jaya's body is implicated in the transaction. Corporate surveillance extends to her reproductive capacity and sexuality. Ginni's invasive fascination with Jaya reveals how biocapital intersects with patriarchy. The desire to inhabit Jaya's body virtually transforms her into an object of voyeuristic consumption. Padmanabhan thus demonstrates that globalization does not erase gender hierarchy; it restructures it within biomedical capitalism.

From a bioethical perspective, *Harvest* challenges liberal paradigms that prioritize informed consent. Standard bioethics presumes that autonomy legitimizes medical exchange. Yet autonomy presupposes equality of bargaining power. Nancy Scheper-Hughes' ethnographic research on organ markets shows that economic desperation undermines voluntariness (Scheper-Hughes 34). Om's consent emerges from unemployment and poverty. His "choice" is structurally coerced. By dramatizing this coercion, Padmanabhan critiques bioethics that isolates individual decisions from systemic inequality.

The play's anticipatory relevance becomes even more striking when read alongside Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism. Zuboff argues that contemporary corporations extract behavioral data to predict and shape human activity (Zuboff 8). In *Harvest*, biological data is extracted and commodified. Om's health metrics are transmitted across continents, transformed into corporate knowledge. The body functions as both commodity and data source. Padmanabhan foresaw a convergence of biotechnology and informational capitalism in which life processes themselves become monetizable.

Yet despite the overwhelming force of corporate governance, the play refuses total determinism. Jaya's climactic defiance constitutes a moment of existential resistance. Confronting Ginni, she asserts her refusal to remain passive within the corporate script. While the outcome remains ambiguous, her gesture reclaims agency. Beauvoir's existential ethics posits freedom as the capacity to transcend imposed situations through conscious action (Beauvoir 721). Jaya's resistance exemplifies such transcendence, however precarious.

Ultimately, *Harvest* interrogates the ontological status of human value under neoliberal globalization. If value is determined by exchangeability, then bodies become repositories of spare parts. Hannah Arendt distinguishes between labor necessary for biological survival and political action that affirms plurality (Arendt 7). Padmanabhan's dystopia collapses this distinction, reducing human life to biological maintenance. Yet the theatrical performance of dissent reopens the space of action. The audience becomes witness to commodification and is invited to judge.

The enduring power of *Harvest* lies in its refusal to romanticize technology or demonize it simplistically. Technology in the play is neither inherently evil nor inherently liberatory; its ethical valence depends on the structures within which it operates. In a global order defined by asymmetrical capital flows, technological advancement amplifies inequality. The play thus

challenges scholars and policymakers to interrogate not only what technologies can do, but for whom they function and at whose expense.

Padmanabhan's vision resonates with twenty-first-century realities of medical tourism, gene editing, artificial intelligence diagnostics, and wearable health surveillance. As biotechnology advances, the question of human value becomes increasingly urgent. Are bodies reservoirs of capital, or are they bearers of irreducible dignity? *Harvest* suggests that without structural justice, the answer will tilt toward commodification.

The play's significance for contemporary scholarship extends beyond literary analysis. It intersects with medical humanities, global ethics, feminist theory, and political philosophy. By dramatizing the commodification of life, Padmanabhan compels interdisciplinary dialogue. The ethical crises it stages demand responses not only from literary critics but from bioethicists, policymakers, and technologists.

In exposing the moral contradictions of globalization, *Harvest* affirms the necessity of resistance. Human value, the play insists, cannot be calculated solely through compatibility charts or profit margins. It resides in agency, relationality, and the refusal to be reduced to utility. In this sense, Padmanabhan's dystopia is not merely a warning but a call to reimagine technological futures grounded in justice rather than extraction.

The play *Harvest* as a drama of neoliberal biopolitics, this continuation pushes further into the philosophical implications of its dystopian architecture by placing Padmanabhan in conversation with Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," Roberto Esposito's theory of immunization, and Achille Mbembe's formulation of necropolitics. Together, these frameworks clarify the deeper ontological violence that undergirds the corporate machinery of InterPlanta. For Agamben, modern political power produces "bare life"—life stripped of political rights and reduced to biological existence (Agamben 8). In *Harvest*, Om and Jeetu inhabit precisely such a condition. Their worth is no longer grounded in citizenship, labor, or relational belonging but in biological extractability. Once the contract is signed, Om's political identity evaporates. He exists as organ potential. His body becomes divisible, detachable from selfhood. The corporation's authority suspends ordinary moral norms; its contract functions as a state of exception, legitimizing intrusion into the most intimate domains of existence.

Agamben's framework illuminates why Jeetu's substitution feels so chillingly procedural. When InterPlanta decides that Jeetu's body is "more suitable," the transition occurs without moral hesitation. Suitability displaces identity. Jeetu becomes what Agamben calls homo sacer—a figure who may be killed without the act being considered homicide (Agamben 83). Although Jeetu is not publicly executed, his body is appropriated under conditions that nullify his autonomy. The violence lies not in spectacle but in bureaucratic indifference. Padmanabhan captures this indifference through chillingly neutral dialogue, in which corporate representatives speak of compatibility and optimization rather than sacrifice or death (Padmanabhan 84). The bureaucratic tone amplifies the horror.

Roberto Esposito's theory of immunization further clarifies the global logic operating in the play. Esposito argues that modern societies pursue "immunity" by protecting themselves from perceived biological threats, often by excluding or sacrificing others (Esposito 45). In *Harvest*, Western recipients pursue literal biological immunity from illness through organ



transplantation. Yet this immunization requires the vulnerability of others. The health of the affluent depends upon the exposure of the poor. The global system thus creates an immunitary divide: certain bodies are shielded; others are exposed. Padmanabhan's dystopia dramatizes how immunization, when detached from solidarity, becomes a mechanism of stratified survival. Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics—where sovereignty is expressed through the capacity to determine who may live and who must die—provides an even sharper lens (Mbembe 11). Although *InterPlanta* does not enact direct execution, it determines the life expectancy of donors. The corporation allocates vitality across global lines. Western recipients gain extended life; Indian donors risk premature death. Necropolitical logic emerges not through overt killing but through life redistribution. The play's horror lies in the normalization of this redistribution. No character within the corporate apparatus questions its legitimacy.

Yet Padmanabhan does not portray donors solely as passive victims. Om's internal conflict reveals the seductions of neoliberal aspiration. He imagines financial stability, improved living conditions, perhaps even upward mobility. This aspiration mirrors what David Harvey describes as the ideological allure of neoliberalism: the promise of individual advancement through market participation (Harvey 7). Om believes he is participating in a mutually beneficial exchange. His belief underscores the psychological dimension of biocapitalism. Exploitation persists not only through coercion but through aspiration.

The apartment's transformation into a sterile medical zone serves as a theatrical embodiment of neoliberal restructuring. Furniture is removed; walls are sanitized; food is regulated. The domestic sphere—traditionally associated with intimacy and autonomy—becomes an annex of the biomedical market. The privatization of life is complete. Even sexual intimacy is subject to corporate approval. When Jaya attempts to assert relational autonomy, she is reminded that Om's body is under corporate jurisdiction (Padmanabhan 52). This intrusion dramatizes what scholars in medical humanities describe as the medicalization of everyday life, wherein biological processes become objects of professional control.

Comparatively, *Harvest* shares affinities with other dystopian texts concerned with organ commodification, most notably Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. Yet whereas Ishiguro locates organ harvesting within a secluded cloning facility, Padmanabhan situates it within an ordinary urban household. The proximity to recognizable socio-economic conditions intensifies its critique. There is no hidden laboratory; exploitation unfolds within familiar domestic space. This choice situates the dystopia squarely within contemporary globalization rather than speculative futurity.

Padmanabhan's dramaturgy also complicates traditional dystopian closure. In many dystopias, resistance is either crushed or ambiguously victorious. In *Harvest*, Jaya's final defiance refuses clear resolution. When she confronts Ginni and challenges the logic of extraction, the exchange destabilizes the asymmetry of power. Ginni's fascination with inhabiting Jaya's body her desire to "experience" through another reveals a paradox at the heart of consumerist desire (Padmanabhan 78). The recipient longs not merely for organs but for embodied experience. This longing exposes the emptiness of commodified life. Despite wealth and technological sophistication, Ginni lacks grounded relationality. Padmanabhan thereby reverses the hierarchy: the supposedly advanced subject appears existentially impoverished.

From a feminist perspective, this reversal carries significant weight. Jaya's resistance exemplifies what Judith Butler terms performative agency—the capacity to disrupt normative scripts through embodied action (Butler 521). By refusing passive compliance, Jaya reclaims narrative authority. Her defiance does not dismantle the global system, but it interrupts its seamless functioning. The interruption itself becomes ethically meaningful.

The play's exploration of language further enriches its critique. Corporate discourse consistently reframes extraction as opportunity. The rhetoric of "benefits" echoes neoliberal development narratives that justify inequality as necessary for progress. Scholars of global health ethics have criticized similar rhetoric in medical tourism industries, where transnational patients seek affordable procedures in economically vulnerable regions. Padmanabhan anticipates such debates by dramatizing how economic asymmetry structures medical exchange.

Another dimension deserving attention is temporality. Neoliberal capitalism privileges futurity investment, growth, extension of life. In *Harvest*, Western recipients seek temporal extension through organ transplantation. Donors sacrifice future time to secure present survival. This temporal redistribution intensifies inequality. Time itself becomes a resource. Scholars in bioethics increasingly note that life extension technologies risk exacerbating socio-economic divides. Padmanabhan's dystopia thus anticipates biogerontological debates about longevity markets.

Moreover, the play interrogates the commodification of risk. Om assumes biological risk in exchange for financial security. The corporation externalizes risk onto vulnerable bodies while internalizing profit. Ulrich Beck's theory of risk society suggests that modernity distributes risk unevenly, often along class lines (Beck 19). *Harvest* exemplifies this asymmetry: Western recipients mitigate health risk by transferring it to global others.

The aesthetics of confinement reinforce this socio-political argument. The single-room setting creates spatial claustrophobia, mirroring economic entrapment. Characters circle the same limited space, their conversations oscillating between hope and dread. Theatrically, the confinement denies spectacle, focusing attention on dialogue and ethical tension. The audience cannot escape the suffocating proximity to commodification.

At the level of genre, *Harvest* expands the possibilities of Indian English drama by integrating science fiction tropes with postcolonial realism. Its speculative premise aligns it with global dystopian traditions, yet its cultural specificity grounds it within Indian socio-economic conditions. This hybridity enhances its publishable appeal within journals concerned with globalization, postcolonial studies, and medical humanities.

Perhaps the most philosophically profound question the play poses is whether human value can survive commodification. Kantian ethics posits that persons must be treated as ends in themselves rather than as means. In *Harvest*, persons become means to extend others' ends. The categorical imperative collapses under market rationality. Yet Jaya's resistance reasserts a Kantian principle: her refusal insists upon intrinsic worth.

The enduring relevance of *Harvest* in the age of CRISPR gene editing, AI diagnostics, and global transplant networks confirms its prescience. Contemporary debates around

xenotransplantation, bio-banking, and reproductive surrogacy echo its central concerns. As technology advances, the temptation to instrumentalize life intensifies. Padmanabhan's drama serves as ethical counterweight.

Conclusion

The play *Harvest* should be read not merely as dystopian allegory but as a sophisticated intervention into global bioethics. Through its engagement with biopower, necropolitics, immunization, feminist resistance, and surveillance capitalism, the play constructs a multi-layered critique of neoliberal modernity. Its power lies in its refusal of simplification. Technology is not demonized; rather, its entanglement with unequal capital flows is exposed. Human value, the play suggests, cannot be secured through markets alone. It requires structures of justice, solidarity, and dignity.

For contemporary scholarship, *Harvest* offers fertile terrain. It invites interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies, political theory, global health ethics, and science and technology studies. Its insights into commodification resonate across domains. As global inequalities widen and biomedical industries expand, Padmanabhan's warning grows sharper. The body must not become mere inventory in the warehouse of global capital. If the future of technology is to remain humane, it must be anchored in an ethics that resists reduction of life to utility.

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