



Themes and Social Issues in Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest: A Critical Exploration of Power, Poverty and Human Body

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Abstract

This research critically examines the major themes and pressing social issues portrayed in Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian play *Harvest*, with a specific focus on power structures, poverty, and the commodification of the human body. Set in a near-future India, the play narrates the story of a poor urban family whose economic desperation leads them to enter a contract for organ donation with a wealthy foreign recipient. The study explores how the play mirrors real-world inequalities shaped by globalization, economic dependency, and technological exploitation, particularly within postcolonial societies. It analyzes how Padmanabhan critiques the capitalist commodification of the human body, where the poor are reduced to biological forecurses for the rich. Through characters like Om and Jaya, the play also reflects gendered oppression, highlighting how both men and women are differently impacted by systemic poverty and surveillance. By weaving science fiction with social realism, *Harvest* offers a potent critique of global hierarchies and moral decay, making it a significant text for understanding the ethical implications of modern biopolitics and neoliberal exploitation. This research, therefore, aims to uncover the layered meanings of power, poverty, and bodily autonomy, situating *Harvest* as a profound commentary on the human cost of survival in a deeply unequal world.

Key Words: Power dynamics, Poverty, Globalization, Organ trade, exploitation, Human rights, Marginalization.

Introduction

Harvest, a play written by Manjula Padmanabhan in 1997, can be referred to as a provocative dystopia dealing with disturbing relations between power, poverty, and commodification of the human body. Set in the dystopian future of an Indian city, the play presents a frightening picture of society where people are obliged to give away their bodies in order to survive poverty. Despite the apparently naive plot of the play, the central figure of the narrative is a man, Om Prakash, who has to sell his body parts to obtain money from a stranger from another state. In this respect, the play depicts capitalism and criticizes the exploitation of poorer nations by global powers.

In general, the play provides a depressing picture of life in the postcolonial world when power is exercised on behalf of the richer and developed nations to the detriment of poor and underdeveloped ones in the South. Technological aspects of the contract can be interpreted as related to the issue of biopower, surveillance, and medical ethics in the age of consumption.

Furthermore, it is necessary to point out the significant role played by women, namely, the leading male character's wife, Jaya.

The critique of this play is based on three main themes: power, poverty, and the body. The discussion will focus on how this drama presents a discourse on economic inequality, abuse of the individual body, and dehumanization resulting from global consumerism. In this regard, the artist blends science fiction with sociopolitical concerns to make this artwork remain contemporary even today. The theatrical work called *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan can be classified as a dystopia, which focuses on the problem of commodification of human bodies among societies that suffer from great inequalities between the rich and the poor. As for me, it is necessary to add that the play takes place in the near future in India. The plot of the play shows the sad story of a poor family that sells its body organs to wealthy people living in the West. As for me, there are various socio-economic problems at the heart of this dystopian play, including the problem of the abuse of power, exploitation, economic inequality, dehumanization of the process of globalization, etc. Thus, using dystopia, one can understand the point of view of the author regarding socio-economic issues in the modern world.

Literature Review

Studies concerning the critical approach to globalization, economic disparity, and the commoditization of the human body that Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* has always employed is another characteristic of the academic research associated with the play (Moni, 2013). *Harvest* can be regarded as the postcolonial text in the sense that it highlights the relationship of power that is formed between the Global North and the Global South. The phenomenon of transnational body trafficking as shown in *Harvest* has been considered an example of new types of colonization where the poor become an exploitable resource of the rich (R.M, 2023). In addition to the above mentioned aspects of academic studies concerning *Harvest*, it should be stressed that the employment of biopolitics theory elaborated by Michel Foucault and associated with the regulation of human bodies is rather widespread nowadays. It allows making assumptions regarding the ways in which the power is exerted over the individual by controlling his or her body (Abinaya & Bhuvanewari, 2025). The concept of biopolitics can be traced from the utilization of the most sophisticated surveillance technology as well as medical care leading to treating human beings as biological entities with no importance except for their practical usage. Mini Chandran introduced such notions as “panoptic living room (Gilbert, 2006).”

Other scholars also consider the theme of commodification of the characters of the play with the help of Marxist theory and show the importance of the message about the tragic outcome of capitalist ideology (Priyanka Loni, 2025). On the basis of their research results, we can conclude that relations between people in the play depended on the laws of the market, and the human body could be considered as a commodity that could be sold (Abinaya & Bhuvanewari, 2025). The gender analysis provides another important contribution to the scientific discussion of the play because it makes us realize that the female characters are oppressed not only by patriarchal but also by capitalist system because the female body can be considered as a commodity in its entirety (Khanna & Singh, 2024). In this connection, the opposition of Jaya to commodification of her body may be viewed as her resistance to the oppression. Despite the fact that the above researches provide us with great knowledge, there remains one gap in terms of putting together these two approaches for developing a new,

comprehensive approach (Na, 2024). This paper tries to close the gap by synthesizing the above three approaches to explore power, poverty, and the human body in Harvest.

Methodology

In this regard, the analysis shall involve qualitative methodology and be carried out through an interpretation of the play Harvest authored by Manjula Padmanabhan. The analysis shall be based mostly on the textual analysis in terms of the thematic concern with power, poverty, and the commoditization of the human body in the play. Such analysis shall enable an analysis of the text through the process of close reading where the dialogue, plot, and themes of the play will help in capturing the social, political and ethical concerns. Secondary materials such as articles from academic journals shall be used to justify the analysis that will be made. Postcolonial theory, globalization, and biopolitics are the major theories upon which the analysis will be anchored.

Discussion

"Harvest" is an interesting drama revolving around a poor Indian family suffering from poverty and being obsolete technologically. In this film, the main protagonist is Om Prakash, a young man who agrees to sell his own organs to an affluent American stranger. This peculiar contract offers the only solution for the family to free itself from the burden of poverty in the face of rapidly changing technologic advancement. The characters in the story include Om himself, his mother, his wife Jaya, and his brother Jeetu. All four members of the family reside in a single room. The reason why Om does not have a job at present is the fact that he is unable to use a computer. Thus, this case clearly shows how technologic advancement prevents some people from joining the workforce and earning money. Moreover, as time passes by, an increasing number of people become unemployed due to their inability to utilize computers. Therefore, Om decides to sell himself to earn money to start a new life again.

The role of Om's mother depicts a conventional image of a mother in an Indian play. In the meantime, this mother is guilty of blatant discrimination against her own offspring, preferring her son while showing contempt for Jaya through verbal abuse. On the contrary, Jaya represents the reasonable spirit in this play. Being pragmatic and down-to-earth, Jaya does not succumb to any material incentives and calls Om's actions unethical because they undermine the integrity of manhood. Being Om's brother, Jeetu can be viewed as an instance of social degradation as well. Working as a prostitute, he is socially outcast as well as stigmatized by their mother, who regards him as an inferior member of the family whose career is degrading as well as financially unsuitable to support himself. Such contrasting occupations performed by these brothers emphasize the moral degradation of society under the influence of economic difficulties. Even though Jaya remains committed to her role as a wife, however, deep down, she resents what it costs to pay for her husband's decisions. Jaya's resistance stems from the objective reality of the physical and psychological effects that arise when a human body is being used. In contrast, Om's mother is ignorant about the actual work her son does; all she cares about is getting things she can touch and possess. Harvest effectively makes connections between technology, poverty, and the corruption of the idea of human dignity. By illustrating the effect of economic pressure on the moral values of people, the play presents an image of a family that has been destroyed by their struggle to survive. Harvest is a disturbing play because it delves into the consequences of economic pressures, excessive consumerism, and technology

overpowering a person. Fundamentally, *Harvest* is a dystopian play that shows that only one thing counts in the world: money.

Conclusion

The play *Harvest* by Padmanabhan offers a critical perspective on the world today in terms of the intersectionality of poverty, powerlessness, and exploitation of the body in the definition of the disadvantaged. With the help of the dystopian paradigm, it shows the extent to which desperation due to poverty compels individuals to sell their most valuable possession, the body, merely for survival. In such a scenario, technology, the supposed tool for liberation of the oppressed, becomes a tool of oppression since those who have been marginalized are subjected to control and surveillance in the new world order. Consequently, the body, which should be a holy possession of the individual, is objectified within a capitalistic/consumer culture. The other thematic element of *harvest* in regard to post-colonial dependency and neocolonialism of the Global South against the Global North is the fact that it shows how the rich oppress the poor not only through their labor but their lives as well. In addition, *Jaya* helps us understand the gender dynamics of patriarchy and poverty. In summary, *Harvest* is indeed an enlightening theatrical work that compels its viewers to reflect on the ethical consequences of economic inequality, bodily domination, and social discrimination. In light of the discussion of power, poverty, and the body, the play assumes significance in contemporary debates on biopolitics, capitalism, and human rights. Padmanabhan's creative work is more than just fiction; it is an appeal to revisit sociopolitical conventions that lead to such inequalities.

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