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Organs on Sale: Critiquing Literary Representation of BioMedical Imperialism in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Abstract: Padmanabhan's *Harvest* depicts the dystopian aspect of power relations between eastern and western countries: her creative genius visualizes the grim future of developing countries like India where destitute people are forced to sell their organs to rich donors in first world countries for the sake of food, water, shelter and economic support. The advancement of medical science is encouraged for the purpose of a better cure for ailing bodies, but the same medical techniques can be manipulated by powerful people to exploit the weak. Since the advanced medical services are costly only rich people can reach them, it may become a handmaid of rich and powerful people. Written in futuristic and fictional mode, *Harvest* tries to depict the commoditization of body and horrible future of modern medical science. Rich and ailing people of first world countries are masters with huge wealth and modern medicine at their disposal; while poor and helpless people of third world countries are slaves whose only source of income is their healthy bodies. Poor people are forced to sell their bodies for the general needs of their families. A new market has emerged where rich and sick people can easily buy health from poor and needy people. Padmanabhan's play depicts third world countries as fields where wealthy first world people can easily harvest healthy bodies and organs.

Keywords: *Organ, Body, Market, Commoditization, Power Relations*

A well-known cartoonist and illustrator Manjula Padmanabhan is also a rewarded playwright, journalist and short story writer. She

has the honour of winning Aristotle Onassis International Drama Award for her avant-garde play *Harvest* (1997). This play was selected for the first prize from 1470 entries of a number of noted playwrights from all over the world. Later on, this play was turned into a thriller and scientific movie by a famous Bollywood director Govind Nihalani. Manjula Padmanabhan was born in 1953 in Delhi and her residence is still in Delhi. But her childhood was spent in Sweden, Pakistan and Thailand as her father was a diplomat who was transferred from one country to another. After her education, she started working as a cartoonist and journalist for *Parsinia*, a small magazine devoted to the cause of Parsi community. Later she worked as a freelance writer and illustrator for a number of magazines and newspapers. Apart from cartoon strips, she has written a number of short stories and children's books. Issues like alienation and marginalization play a major role in her books.

Harvest (1997) is a visionary and futuristic play about the sale of human body parts and power relations between developed and developing countries. This three-act play is set in some near-future when scientific advancement may make it possible to transplant each and every organ of one person to another. Today the medical science prescribes only the spare parts like kidneys to be transplanted. But the situation may take the horrible turn when the extremely rich people would start craving for ever youth and immortality with the help of upcoming advances in medical sciences. Since the whole world has become a globalized market, it would become possible for the rich and ailing people of the first world countries to purchase body organs from the poor, starving but healthy youths of the third world countries. In *Harvest* Padmanabhan visualizes the unemployed and penniless people of India selling their whole body to rich people of USA in exchange for food, water, shelter and economic support for their families.

Padmanabhan's futuristic assumption is not a fantasy based concept but well grounded in real-world conditions. Organ trade, which can be defined as the sale of human organs for the purpose of transplantation, is a fast emerging worldwide phenomenon today. According to the reports of 2011, about 90, 000 people were waiting for new organs in the United States. The demand for organs' transplantation is constantly increasing worldwide. Human organ trade is banned in several countries due to different reasons and in different ways. But organ trafficking is rampant

everywhere. Iran is the first nation to legalize the organ trade but it does not allow commercial organ trade on large scale. Australia and Singapore have recently legalized organ trade as the living organ donors can be monetarily compensated. In United States sale of organs is banned but the government is encouraging organ transplant by allowing the people to donate their organs. Governments of other countries are encouraging organ trade in some way or other. Worldwide, the current trend is toward legalization of human organs trading.

Before 1994 and the passage of the Transplantation of Human Organs Act (THOA) there was little check on organ trade in India. India had almost undeclared legal freedom to flourish as organ trading market. Low cost and easy availability of human organs brought a boom in Indian organ market. Soon it became an international phenomenon and transformed India into one of the largest kidney transplant centres of the world. But soon a number of problems started emerging. In several cases, donors were underpaid, kidnapped and cheated in several ways. Due to the lack of any strict law on organ trade, human rights were often violated. So the Indian government had to ban the sale of organs and pass the Transplantation of Human Organs Act (1994). According to this Act, an organ donor should be closely related to the receiver and he must be donating his organ out of affection for the receiver.

In *Harvest* Inter Planta Services, a multinational company of USA has opened some of its branches in India. It selects the unemployed and healthy people as donors of body organs and provides them and their families all the facilities ranging from basic amenities of the household to articles of fashion and entertainment. The play opens with the male protagonist Om coming back to his single-room home in a tenement building with the news that he has got a good job. His mother and wife Jaya get overjoyed to hear this as they have been severely suffering from a number of problems since he has lost his job of a clerk. But when the reality dawns on them Jaya bursts into tears whereas his mother ignores the seriousness of the situation. Om informs that he has donated his organs to some unknown foreigner who will provide his family with enormous riches. Soon the agents of Inter Planta Services reach his home and install a number of scientifically advanced equipment in order to fulfil all the domestic needs of his family. Through Contact Module, one of this video conferencing like equipment, the rich foreigner Ginni visits

his family and controls his dietary and sanitary habits. Her sole motive is to keep Om healthy so that she may get healthy organs from him. She says: "The Most Important Thing is to keep Auwm smiling. Coz if Auwm's smiling, it means his body is smiling and if his body's smiling, it means his organs are smiling. And that's the kind of organs that'll survive the transplant best, smiling organs" (Padmanabhan 1997: 41).

But when the time of transplant really comes the guards of Inter Planta Services forcibly take away Om's brother Jeetu instead. Jeetu is a male prostitute whose occupation is to sell carnal pleasure to his clients. At the time of transplantation his body is infected with germs; still, he is diagnosed as a more suitable donor. The only person in the family to lament the ill fate of Jeetu is Jaya to whom he is not only a brother-in-law but also an audacious lover. In the last scene of the play, she is shocked to find out that the receiver of organs was not a young female but an old male foreigner named Virgil who deliberately puts on the façade of an animated image of the seductive and lovely Ginni. Through successful transplantation, Virgil occupies the whole visible body of Jeetu and now in Jeetu's appearance, he starts making sexual advances towards Jaya. But Jaya defeats him by refusing to yield merely to the body of her lover Jeetu. The tragic play ends with the optimistic note of the soul's ultimate victory over matter.

Thus this dystopian play presents a horrible picture of the commoditization of human body: human body in the postmodern market is like any other object and it is easily available in the market for a certain degree of the amount. Poor and helpless people of third world countries will sell their body parts to rich and ailing people of first world countries. This can be seen as a power relation between developed and developing countries where the latter has to succumb before the monetary power of the former. This critical situation can also be seen as a critique of the third world countries like India where severe unemployment forces people to take inhuman and suicidal steps just for the sake of fulfilling their basic needs. The play depicts that Om Prakash is not the only person to donate his organs; there are thousands of people like him who have to go through the inhuman procedure of selection by Inter Planta Services. These jobless and desperate people have no option other than seeing their body organs as spare parts and solving their problems by donating them. Om's prostitute brother Jeetu also solves his

economic problems by using his body which is another variety of body-abuse.

Padmanabhan's visionary sense visualizes rich Americans captivating poor Indians and treating them as one of their apparatuses to serve their nefarious needs. Immediately after the selection of Om Prakash as a registered donor the guards of Inter Planta Services come and install a number of equipment in his house. One of these types of equipment provides his whole family artificially prepared food in the shape of multi-coloured pellets. Through Contact Module Ginni keeps a watch over Om's family and makes sure that they take their food at the proper time; her motive behind this is to keep Om healthy whose organs she is about to own. Om looks carelessly happy to receive all these facilities, completely unaware of the lurking danger behind these cosy comforts. It is his wife Jaya who is sensible and sensitive enough to warn him against this conspiracy:

OM: Would she spend so much money on me, then? If I am just – a – a chicken to her? Answer me that! Do you know how much she's spent on us? Our comfort?

JAYA: Never mind chicken – have you seen how their beef cattle live? Air-conditioned! Individual potties! Music from loudspeakers – why, they even have their own psychiatrists! All to ensure that their meat, when it finally goes to Ginni's table, will be the freshest, purest, sanest, *happiest* – (50).

This dystopian play forecasts that dire poverty of Indians will force them to forget their self-esteem and become the mere instruments in the hands of rich foreigners. Om and his family members forget their pride and culture before the resplendent comforts and pleasures provided by the westerners. They do not mind their constant surveillance by Ginni who treats them like captives and beggars. Om does not hesitate to call his wife his sister in order to prove himself a bachelor and save his job as a donor. When Ginni cross-questions him regarding this, he swears by almighty God while repeating the same lie. Ma flatters Ginni by calling her an angel and Jeetu forgets his family obligations to see the sensual image of Ginni on the screen of Contact Module. It is only Jaya who from the very beginning criticizes Ginni and subverts her ill intentions when she appears before her in her real identity i.e. Virgil. Jaya is the only bold and vibrant character in the play to resist this inhuman

situation and fight as a liberated individual with a free will. Virgil, not in person but in electrically produced persona, appears before her and tries to seduce her in order to impregnate her. After occupying Jeetu's body his next aim is to get a healthy offspring from Jaya. But Jaya rejects his proposal and expresses her disgust at his virtual technology and deceitful ways of fulfilling his nefarious intentions. When Virgil forcefully tries to show his seeds in her womb she becomes aggressive and defensive; she safeguards her pride and honour by threatening Virgil that she herself is the master of her body and life and that she will destroy it if he tries to contaminate it with his immoral touch:

Jaya: I don't want your make to believe travels! I don't want your tricking comforts! (99).

She explains further:

I've discovered a new definition for winning. Winning by losing. I win if you lose (100).

She continues her attack:

I'm not willing to caretake *my* body for *your* sake. The only thing I have left which is still mine is my death. My death and my pride (101).

The play *Harvest* also presents a penetrating criticism of the scientific advancement which is instrumental in reducing human beings to the status of animals and inanimate objects. Human dignity and self-respect have been reduced to nothingness in the utter mechanical world of science. This devilish power of science enables the rich and greedy people to become the cannibals of the poor ones. The play presents a horrible picture of human degradation and oblivion of human integrity in the crafty web of technology: Om Prakash tells his family members that in order to be selected by Inter Planta Services six thousand men like him have to fill a number of forms, stand in several queues and go through a totally mechanical and impersonal procedure:

OM: We were standing all together in that line. And the line went on – and on not just on one floor, but slanting up, up, forever. All in iron bars and grills. It was like being in a cage shaped like a tunnel. All around, up, down, sideways, there were men –

JAYA: Doing what?

OM: Slowly moving. All the time. I couldn't understand it...
Somewhere there must be a place to stop, to write a form?
Answer questions? But no. Just- forward, forward, forward.
One person fainted but others pushed him onward. And at the
corners, a- a sort of pipe was kept....

MA: For what?

OM: To make water, what else!

MA: Even while moving?

Om: You had to be quick. Other men would squeeze past
behind the fellow who was doing his business. Sometimes
there was no place and he'd had to move on before he
finished. Still dripping (11).

Thus *Harvest* depicts the dystopian aspect of power relations between eastern and western countries: it foreshadows the grim future of developing countries like India where destitute people are forced to sell their organs to rich donors in first world countries for the sake of food, water, shelter and economic support. The advancement of medical science is encouraged for the purpose of a better cure for ailing bodies, but the same medical techniques can be manipulated by powerful people to exploit the weak. Since the advanced medical services are costly only rich people can reach them, it may become a handmaid of rich and powerful people. Written in futuristic and fictional mode, *Harvest* successfully depicts the commoditization of body and horrible future of modern medical science. Rich and ailing people of first world countries are masters with huge wealth and modern medicine at their disposal; while poor and helpless people of third world countries are slaves whose only source of income is their healthy bodies. Poor people are forced to sell their bodies for the general needs of their families. A new market has emerged where rich and sick people can easily buy health from poor and needy people. It obviously seems to portray third world countries as fields where wealthy first world people can easily harvest healthy bodies and organs. Doubtlessly modern medical advancements are a boon for mankind but they may prove to be a curse if these inventions are used for nefarious and selfish purposes. Since medical science has made it possible to subsist on donated organs and medical science is doing wonders each day, a day may come when rich people may exploit poor people by buying their organs and living an eternal life through their

bodies. But the playwright is not purely pessimistic as she hints (in Jaya's rejection of sexual advances of Virgil to sow his seeds in her womb) that the rich may buy bodies of the poor but not their spirit.

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