

Mechanized Humanity: Reading Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* through the Lens of AI

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ABSTRACT

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) presents a futuristic world in which human organs become commodities traded between the poor of developing countries and the wealthy of the West. Though the play basically centres on a critique of biomedical imperialism, it also hints at the ethical challenges posed by artificial intelligence and technological control. This paper analyses the play as an allegory for the loss of human values in an age of artificial intelligence and surveillance. Through the operation of the fictional company InterPlanta Services, Padmanabhan imagines a system that regulates human life through technology. This is basically done by transforming human bodies into data and emotions into measurable outputs. The relationship between Om Prakash's poor family and their unseen benefactor depicts the modern dependence of individuals on automated and code-based systems that promise comfort as well as control. The paper discusses how issues central to AI ethics, such as surveillance, consent, privacy, and human dignity, are reflected in the play's depiction of mechanized existence. The analysis focuses on Jaya's resistance to technological domination as an assertion of human dignity and moral autonomy. Her defiance of both physical and digital control symbolizes the enduring human capacity for ethical judgment. By contrasting her rebellious consciousness with the passive acceptance of other characters, the study emphasizes Padmanabhan's belief that machines or external agents cannot control the exercise of human ethics. The paper argues that *Harvest* serves as a warning against the moral vacuum and moral degradation of technology. The play reminds us that progress must be guided by responsibility, and that the true measure of civilization lies not in the intelligence of its machines but in the conscience of its people.

KEYWORDS

AI, consent, data, mechanized existence, privacy, surveillance

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Manjula Padmanabhan, a well-known cartoonist, illustrator, and writer, is one of the most remarkable voices in contemporary Indian English drama. Her play *Harvest* (1997) won the prestigious Aristotle Onassis International Drama Award and was later adapted into a film by Govind Nihalani. Padmanabhan, born in Delhi in 1953, spent her childhood in various countries such as Sweden, Pakistan, and Thailand because of her father's diplomatic career. After returning to India, she worked as a journalist and cartoonist before establishing herself as a playwright and fiction writer. Across her creative works, issues like alienation, marginalization, and the tension between technology and humanity often appear at the center.

Harvest is a futuristic play that imagines a world where human bodies have become commodities. It presents a society in which global inequality allows the rich of developed nations to purchase the organs of the poor from developing nations. While the play was considered as a critique of biomedical imperialism and capitalist exploitation, it also speaks powerfully to the ethical questions surrounding artificial intelligence and technological control in the twenty-first century. The play anticipates a world where human beings are governed by invisible systems; people are monitored by machines and they are seen as products, reduced to data points for business and profit.

Through the framework of AI ethics, *Harvest* can be seen as a drama that warns against the loss of human autonomy in the face of algorithmic authority. The concepts of surveillance, consent, privacy, and digital colonization, now central to discussions of AI, are all symbolically connected in the relationship between the donor Om Prakash and the corporate network InterPlanta Services Inc. Padmanabhan's play *Harvest*, long before the current debates on AI, exposes the moral dangers of a world where technological progress is quite detached from ethical responsibility.

2 | TECHNOLOGY, EXPLOITATION, AND THE ETHICS OF CONTROL

The plot of *Harvest* revolves around Om Prakash, an unemployed clerk from a poor Indian family, who signs a contract with a multinational company called InterPlanta Services Inc. The company, based in the United States, promises to take care of his family's needs in exchange for the right to use his organs whenever required by an anonymous client. His mother Ma and his wife Jaya are at first thrilled by the sudden improvement in their living conditions. Yet this new prosperity comes at the cost of Om's freedom, privacy, and dignity.

This deal between Om and American Company can be symbolically seen as a deal between man and devil; surrender of common people to technological systems. InterPlanta functions much like an artificial intelligence network that decides and controls every movement of the family. The company's control devices like surveillance cameras, communication modules, and voice instructions create an environment of total automation. Every act of living, from eating to bathing, is monitored and evaluated. The family's choices

no longer belong to them; they are mere data subjects and data points for the company and their rich client.

Ginni, who pretends to be their client and ‘receiver’ of their organs, communicates with the family through the video interface. She embodies the anonymous identity and deceptive friendliness of technology. She appears friendly, cheerful and affectionate but only serves as the voice of the system that regulates Om’s body. Her constant reminders about hygiene, diet, and emotional well-being remind us the monitoring systems of today’s smart technologies. Ginni’s statement, “The most important thing is to keep Auwm smiling. If his body is smiling, his organs are smiling” (Padmanabhan 1997: 41). is an opt reminder of today’s digital devices of wellness tracking and behaviour optimization. In this way, *Harvest* anticipates the ethical dilemma of AI systems that manipulate human behaviour in the name of care and protection.

Om’s family, though not so poor now, becomes trapped in a cycle of dependence and obedience. The comforts offered by the company are similar to the conveniences promised by artificial intelligence in our time. Smart systems promise safety and ease, but in doing so, they quietly take away human freedom. The family’s submission to technology mirrors the way people today submit to the authority of technology and artificial intelligence without questioning how their data is used or how their choices are shaped.

Om’s mother’s obsession with advanced and latest television exposes the play’s central critique of modern media and technological capitalism. It shows how technology can lure the poor into complacency, overlooking their dignity and making them complicit in their own exploitation. Padmanabhan thus reveals the dark side of mechanization; the decline of human dignity and the gradual replacement of individual judgment with mechanical command. The characters live in a world where moral choices are outsourced to a system that calculates value only in terms of productivity, usage and benefit.

3 | SURVEILLANCE AND THE LOSS OF PRIVACY

One of the central ethical issues of Artificial Intelligence is surveillance. The power to collect, process, and analyse personal information gives technology an almost god-like authority over human life. *Harvest* dramatizes this issue through the invasive presence of the Contact Module installed in Om’s home. The machine acts as both an eye and a voice of power. It records every gesture, applies strict rules, and turns their home into a laboratory of control.

The family’s apartment, which should be a place of privacy and intimacy, becomes a monitored environment where privacy ceases to exist. Every conversation is potentially overheard; every emotion is subject to analysis. When Ginni speaks to Om and his family, she uses affectionate language, but her tone conceals her snobbery. She observes them not as people but as products and commodities. The family learns to perform happiness for the camera because their survival depends on it.

This external happiness of Om’s family reminds us the way social media and AI systems today encourage people to display positivity while hiding distress. The ‘smiling organs’ that

Ginni desires symbolize the data that corporations aim to squeeze from human emotions. The ethical question that arises is not just about surveillance but about consent as well. Om and his family voluntarily sign the contract, but they have no real understanding of its implications. Their consent is coerced by poverty, just as modern users carelessly ignore the dangers of digital surveillance because they cannot live without technological access.

Padmanabhan's depiction of surveillance is not limited to external monitoring. With the passage of time, the characters begin to internalize the commands of the machine. They feel sorry for their words against machine, adjust their movements, and even monitor their emotions. This self-regulation reflects what AI ethicists describe as 'algorithmic conditioning,' where human behaviour is unconsciously shaped by the presence of monitoring systems. The mother Ma becomes particularly fascinated by the luxury and security that surveillance brings. For her, control feels like comfort. Jaya, however, remains aware of its dehumanizing effect. She questions why their family should live like objects of experiment.

The play thus contrasts two moral responses to technology: acceptance and resistance. Ma represents the consumer who trusts the system because it promises convenience. Jaya represents the ethical self who questions the cost of such dependence. Through this contrast, *Harvest* reminds us that ethical awareness must accompany technological progress, or else people will willingly lose freedom for comfort.

4 | AUTONOMY AND THE MECHANIZATION OF THE BODY

At the center of *Harvest* lies a fundamental question of autonomy: what happens when a person's body no longer belongs to him? Om's contract with InterPlanta Services transforms his body into a mechanical object. His organs are no longer symbols of life but commodities that can be owned and sold. This transformation parallels the loss of human agency that occurs when people surrender their decision-making power to artificial systems.

Through Om's story, Padmanabhan dramatizes how human beings can be reduced to biological machines under the influence of technology and profit. The company measures Om's worth through a purely mechanical standard i.e. the condition of his organs. The ethical issue here is not only exploitation but dehumanization. Om becomes a living instrument whose value depends on his biological performance. His emotions, relationships, and individuality have no value in this system.

AI ethics today often discusses the danger of 'machine reductionism,' where humans are seen only as data sets or problem-solving entities. In *Harvest*, this reductionism takes the form of bodily commodification. The company treats Om's body as a storage unit of spare parts, just as AI systems treat human data as raw material for computation. The human soul, with its divine aura and moral depth, disappears behind this pure mechanical business.

Om's acceptance of this condition reflects how individuals often accept algorithmic authority without question. He believes that Ginni's promises of comfort and security justify his loss of control. His wife Jaya, however, sees through this illusion. She realizes that the company's control over their lives is not a gift but a trap. When she tells Om that "their beef

cattle live better than we do (50),” she questions this shortcut method of progress and finds that comfort without freedom is another form of slavery. In many ways, Om’s body becomes the site where ethics and technology collide. The very systems designed to prolong life ultimately rob life of its meaning. His obedience, like that of a machine, signals the moral vacuum at the heart of a society governed by technological rationality.

5 | THE ALGORITHMIC MARKET AND DEHUMANIZATION

Padmanabhan’s futuristic vision of dystopian world is very much like the present-day scenario of digital capitalism. In *Harvest*, the global organ trade represents a virtual marketplace where the rich can purchase health and vitality from the poor. This economy of exchange is reminder of the data economy that defines artificial intelligence today. Just as companies profit from the extraction of personal information, InterPlanta profits from the extraction of human flesh. The ethical foundation of this market is deeply corrupt. It depends on inequality and the illusion of choice. Om’s family consents to the contract, but their consent is shaped by desperation. In the same way, the users of modern technology consent to data surveillance because they have no real alternative. Padmanabhan’s play thus exposes the moral flaw in Om’s act of voluntary participation.

In the title of the play the word ‘*Harvest*’ is perfectly suitable in the present context. The poor are the crops, the rich are the consumers, and technology is the instrument that facilitates extraction. The company’s use of automated systems to monitor, evaluate, and select donors shows how mechanical logic can turn human life into a predictable commodity. The market rewards obedience and punishes deviation; it is a system that mirrors the algorithmic bias of artificial intelligence.

Jeetu, Om’s brother, becomes another tragic victim of this system. A sex worker by profession, he uses his body as his only resource for survival. When the company mistakenly identifies him as a better donor, he is forcibly taken away for organ extraction. The substitution of Jeetu for Om symbolizes the random cruelty of algorithmic selection. The company does not recognize individual identity; it responds only to data inputs. In this way, Padmanabhan predicts the dangers of automation where human judgment is replaced by mechanical efficiency.

Through Jeetu’s suffering, *Harvest* raises an important ethical question: when technology replaces empathy, can morality survive? The operations of company are devoid of compassion. Its decisions are logical but inhuman. This detachment reflects what AI ethicists now call ‘moral distancing,’ where algorithms execute actions without understanding their human consequences. The system that consumes Jeetu’s body resembles a digital network that processes data without consciousness of pain and suffering.

Om’s passive compliance contrasts sharply with Jeetu’s active participation and obsession for Ginni. Both brothers, however, represent different aspects of the same moral crisis. Om gives his body willingly; Jeetu loses it unwillingly. Om becomes victim because of his poverty and Jeetu becomes victim because of his infatuation with seductive image of Ginni. Together they expose a world where consent and coercion become indistinguishable.

This ethical ambiguity forms the heart of Padmanabhan's warning: when systems become powerful enough to control human lives, morality must evolve to confront new forms of exploitation.

6 | JAYA'S ETHICAL RESISTANCE

Among all the characters in *Harvest*, Jaya stands out as the chief protagonist and moral character of the play. Her resistance to InterPlanta's authority transforms her from a victim into an ethical personality. Through her defiance, Padmanabhan offers a vision of human dignity that gives a ray of hope even in a world dominated by machines. From the beginning, Jaya questions Om's decision of organ donation on moral grounds. She recognizes that their newfound comfort comes at the price of their humanity. Her scepticism toward Ginni's kindness reflects her awareness of how technology disguises control under the language of care. When she tells Om that 'air-conditioned cattle' of foreigners also live in comfort before slaughter, she exposes the illusion of technological coziness.

Jaya's rebellion intensifies after the truth about Ginni is revealed. The supposed young woman turns out to be an old man named Virgil who hides behind a digital avatar. This revelation can be interpreted as an allegory for the deceptive nature of artificial intelligence; AI systems mimic human empathy but conceal inhuman motives. Virgil's manipulation of virtual identity hints at the ethical issue of transparency in AI. The users cannot see who or what controls them, just as Jaya cannot see the real person behind the screen.

When Virgil, in Jeetu's body, tries to claim Jaya as his own, the conflict reaches its ethical climax. Jaya's refusal to yield symbolizes the triumph of conscience over technological control. She declares, "I am 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)." This statement expresses the ultimate assertion of moral autonomy in a mechanized world. Even when every external freedom is taken away, Jaya preserves the inner freedom to choose dignity over submission. When Virgil forcefully tries to sow 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 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).

Her defiance also serves as a critique of technological determinism; the technology cannot determine her fate. Jaya's moral clarity shows that ethics cannot be automated. No algorithm can replace the human capacity for conscience and resistance. In this sense, she embodies the hope that AI ethics seeks to preserve: the belief that human values must remain at the center of technological progress. Through Jaya, Padmanabhan also comments on gender and power. The female body in *Harvest* becomes both a site of oppression and a source of rebellion. While Om and Jeetu succumb to the system, Jaya confronts it. Her final

confrontation with Virgil transforms her from an object of surveillance into an agent of judgment. She forces the system to recognize its own demerits and face its own failures. Her victory proves that no technology can master the human soul.

7 | THE HUMAN–MACHINE INTERFACE

Padmanabhan's *Harvest* can also be seen from the angle of human–machine interface; in the play there is almost a blurred boundary between living bodies and technological systems. The setting of the play, filled with screens, automated food dispensers, and medical devices, creates a space where the human home becomes an extension of the machine. The characters live in constant interaction with these devices, which decide and dictate their routines and shape their actions and emotions.

This dependence reflects the growing integration of artificial intelligence into daily life. In the play, the family's apartment is a prototype of what we might now call a 'smart home'. Every aspect of living, from nutrition to entertainment, is governed by technological commands. Yet, instead of freedom, this automation brings submission. The home, which should be a space of intimacy and autonomy, becomes a place of mechanical obedience.

Through this depiction, Padmanabhan anticipates the ethical challenge of human–machine coexistence. Technology, while designed to assist, often begins to dominate. The Contact Module that connects the family to Ginni acts as both a communication tool and a surveillance weapon. It listens, records, and commands. The family's dependence on it mirrors modern society's dependence on intelligent systems that control transportation, healthcare, and social interaction.

The ethical concern is not the presence of machines but the absence of moral balance in their use. In *Harvest*, technology serves the interests of the powerful rather than the collective good. The play warns that when machines become instruments of inequality, they transform from tools of progress into mechanisms of oppression. The family's suffering illustrates how uncontrolled technological power can magnify existing social inequalities, just as AI systems today can reinforce economic and racial biases through the data they process.

8 | ETHICS, CONSENT, AND THE ILLUSION OF CHOICE

Padmanabhan's dramatization of the human–machine relationship makes us well aware of the ethical crisis of modernity. The problem is not that machines can think but that humans may stop thinking ethically about machines. The true danger lies not in artificial intelligence itself, but in the artificial morality that allows it to function without conscience. The ethical questions raised in *Harvest* revolve around one recurring theme: the illusion of choice. Om and his family believe that they have made a free decision to join InterPlanta's program, but their decision is triggered and finalized by their poverty and necessity. In ethical terms, their consent is not genuine; it is shaped by circumstances.

This theme connects closely to the debates on AI ethics, particularly in the context of data consent and automated control. In the digital world, users often 'agree' to the terms of technology without understanding their implications. Their consent is just a ritual of

compliance, not an act of free will. Padmanabhan tries to depict this moral paradox with clarity: Om signs away his body just as modern users sign away their data. Both acts are presented as choices, but both emerge from dependence.

InterPlanta's contract symbolizes the hidden bias of power in technological systems. The company knows everything about the donor, while the donor knows almost nothing about the company. This imbalance unmasks the power dynamics of AI corporations that collect data invisibly while claiming transparency. The result is a world where people participate in their own exploitation under the guise of technological freedom. Jaya's rebellion breaks this illusion. She refuses to accept a world where consent means submission. Her decision to reclaim control, even through the choice of death, redefines autonomy in moral terms. To her, freedom is not the ability to choose comfort but the right to say no. This assertion resonates deeply with the principles of AI ethics, which emphasize on consent, transparency and accountability in the real sense of the word.

Padmanabhan's play also questions whether true ethics can exist in a system designed completely for profit. InterPlanta's operations are efficient but soulless; they are accurate but inhuman. The company's ethics are mechanical, based on cost-benefit logic rather than compassion and sympathy. This mechanization of morality anticipates the contemporary concern that AI may make decisions that are rational but ethically blind. *Harvest* therefore becomes a powerful allegory for the dangers of replacing moral reasoning with mechanical decision-making.

9 | CONCLUSION

Manjula Padmanabhan's futuristic work *Harvest* is one of the most prophetic plays in contemporary Indian drama. Though written before the rise of artificial intelligence, it anticipates the ethical dilemmas of our digital age with great precision. Beneath its story of organ trade lies a deeper inquiry into the relationship between technology, power, and human dignity. Viewed through the lens of AI ethics, *Harvest* reveals how technology can extend existing inequalities and affect human values if not well-controlled. The play portrays a society where the poor are turned into biological products for the rich, and where machines monitor and manage human life. This vision of the playwright reminds us of AI systems that control labour, surveillance, and social behaviour in today's world. The danger Padmanabhan warns of is not technological progress itself but the moral blindness that often accompanies it.

Om Prakash represents the ordinary individual who submits to the machine in exchange for comfort. His mother represents passive acceptance, and Jeetu represents the body exploited without consent. Jaya, however, stands as the ethical conscience of humanity. Her resistance affirms that moral choice survives even in a world ruled by machines. When she declares that the only thing still hers is her death and her pride, she restores dignity to a system designed to erase it.

In *Harvest* the playwright seems to assert that technology must remain subordinate to humanity. Machines can enhance life only when guided by empathy and responsibility.

Without these, technology becomes an instrument of domination. Padmanabhan's play thus appeals for a moral world with innovation, which values human autonomy over mechanical precision, and compassion over profit. Through this play, she 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 has 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

As artificial intelligence continues to shape the modern world, *Harvest* stands as a constant reminder that ethics cannot be automated. The moral questions raised by the play about surveillance, consent, and dignity are almost the same burning questions confronting AI ethics today. The playwright's final message is clear: the future of humanity depends not on how intelligent our machines become, but on how responsibly we use them.

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