

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Where Angels Fear to Tread : Biopolitics and Resistance in Manjula Padmanabhan's "Harvest"**

---

**Miss. Priyanka Basu**

Student ( M.A , B.ED , UGC NET Qualified )

Institute of Education ( P.G ) for Women ( Affiliated to Burdwan University )

Chandannagar, Hooghly , West Bengal , India.

Postal Address: Anandam Apartment, Chabighar, Chandannagar, Hooghly, 712136, West Bengal, India.

---

**Abstract:** The twenty and twenty-first century has witnessed the transformation of human modes of life , both individual and collective , with the renting of wombs , selling of sperms , and trading of kidney , cells , cornea. Literature always tries to reveal the oppressive hidden forces of capitalism and often suggests a strategy of resistance. Capitalism has seduced the world with the promise of making money through the organ trade by preying on the third world bodies. Biopolitics, according to Foucault, is a political rationality that controls the individual bodies and entire population as its subject , to keep them docile and productive. The way in which biopolitics exerts its power on human life and society is known as biopower, that is interested in the mass only in statistical terms and not in existential terms. This paper attempts to decipher the globalised effects of capitalism on the third world, as it is portrayed in the play *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan. In this age of organ marketing, resistance is difficult to imagine, but this paper attempts to carve out

a form of resistance to the oppressive forms of biopower, which is an indispensable element of capitalism.

**Keywords:** Capitalism, Resistance , Organ trade , Biopolitics , Biopower.

The third world countries still struggling with the social and economic legacies of European imperialism, faces significant threats by the global spread of organ trade shrouded under the seduction of the promises of improving health, alleviating poverty and raising general standards of living. Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, a futuristic dystopia set in Bombay, attempts to address the exploitation of the third world body, which is the product of predatory capitalism, with the significant advances in transplant medicine. On one level, *Harvest* portrays the crucial role of technology in

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

policing the lives of the third world donors. At the same time, Padmanabhan also carve out a strategy of resistance against the oppressive force of biopower that is interested in the life of the population only in statistical terms and not in existential terms. Michel Foucault, in *The history of Sexuality* states about the era of biopolitics, when organ transplants became a daily process for human being – “technological development is the weapon of the state to manage, know and intervene in the biological lives and capacities of its citizens, there by achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (140). Foucault himself asserts that biopower was employed outside the state by the nineteenth century - “in a whole series of sub – state institutes such as medical institutions, welfare funds, insurance and so on” (Foucault, *Society Defended*, 165). Today’s medical technologies as it has been portrayed in *Harvest*, frequently intertwine not only the state and sub – state institutions but the first world also decides the legitimacy of the surveillance of a third world individual’s life. Set in a cramped single room tenement of a bleak Mumbai of the future, Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* manifests how the rich western people control the lives of their Indian donors, who provide replacement organs for their owners.

Nancy Scheper Hughes describes “organ market proposals as being founded

upon utilitarian and neo – liberal principles that consistently undermine the fundamental dignity of the human body” (195). The poor people of third world have no rights on their own body. The play *Harvest* begins by tumbling the audience in the middle of the problems and privations of Om Prakash’s family, the dramatist effectively conveys the dire tone of the play in a concise fashion. The four Indian donors of the play Om, his wife Jaya, Om’s mother, referred to as Ma and his brother, Jeetu belong to the Prakash family. The plot gets into gear by revealing Om’s Faustian pact with the Inter Planta Services. Having passed the only criteria of being physically fit Om has been selected for the ‘job’ of selling the rights of his own body to an unknown buyer in the United States. Jaya, his wife, accuses him of making the wrong choice but Om’s reply to her reveals that the miserable condition of their life forced him to take this decision.

Om : No. I went because there wasn’t anything left to do. I went because I lost my job at the company. And why did I lose it? Because I am a clerk and nobody needs clerks anymore! There are no new jobs now, from here till next week! It’s all over! The factories are all closing! There was nothing left for people like us! Don’t you know that? There’s us – and there’s the

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

street gangs – and then the rich (Padmanabhan 230).

The economy of organ trade makes its objects believe that selling organs are much better than earning livelihood by labour. Capitalism brainwashed its subject, so that the economically poor person could see his body as a waste material, a surplus which is not a product of labour but has high demand in the international market. In *Harvest*, Om is also “seduced into selling the organs which his body has ‘spare’ of – in order to solve the economic problems” (Pavinchandra 58). Although Jaya knows about what Om’s job entails, but Ma, an old woman who is guided by her emotion expresses no such regrets about the job of her son. After listening to her son’s promises of better living with luxuries, Ma is mystified: “What kind of job pays a man to sit at home?” (230). Ma’s continuous queries about her son’s job hints at the dream of the third world people which is related with their betterment of living. “Tell me again: all you have to do is to sit home and stay healthy? [ ... ] And they’ll pay you? [...] Even if you do nothing but pick your nose all day?” (Padmanabhan 232). The dream of middle class people is represented through the character of Maawho is astonished at the fact that her son will be paid for doing nothing. Padmanabhan depicts the forces of millennial capitalism appear to provide an

apparently enchanting means of making money.

Michel Foucault, through his discussion of biopower, seeks to move away from articulations of power as rooted in sovereign authority. As Foucault has asserted that “the forces of sovereign power is planted in disciplinary control over the individual, in killing or letting live” (Foucault, *History*, 145). Foucault argues, “modern biopower, extends political control over all the major processes of life itself, treating men as a species, regulating the species’ biological processes – including birth, death, illness”(149). The state regulates the bodies so that they can be useful in the process of production of the state. In *Harvest*, the inhabitants with a one – room tenement with absolute lack of privacy and space, uses a community bathroom two floors down, unsanitary clothes and bodies are prototypical victims endangered to the enchanting illusion of the first world. Their bodies, however, only serve the purpose of the state, if they can be circulated within the production process. The slow splitting of body parts is sanctioned based on the technologically upgraded lifestyle. “Bodies of the inmates are infiltrated not only by the flashing image of Ginni , but by the prescribed dosage of pills for consumptions, powders for application and mysterious small gadgets for inspection “ (Datta 170). The Polygonal Contact Module, that looks like a

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

“white, faceted globe”(Padmanabhan 231) , that illuminates the seductive figure and voice of Ginni, only a false simulation, establishes link between the first world and the third world. The way Ginni intrudes into the family reflects the Foucauldian concept of the sovereign power which “was exercised over bodies through a system of surveillance and via a grid or network of material coercions which effected an efficient and controlled increase (minimum expenditure , maximum return ) in the utility of the subjected body” ( Smart 74 ).

Today, the modern techniques of organ transplantation, new reproductive technologies invite us to dazzle at the achievements of medical science. In the new digital era, *Harvest* identifies the illegal organ trafficking as an agent of exploitation. This play explores , through its post colonial setting ,” how the assurances of improved communication enhanced health and upgraded life style desires contained in these new technologies undergo a sinister transformation in the third world , where access to these technologies does not [ necessarily ] correspond with access to the knowledge that produces or controls them” (Mathur 12). Agamben states about the operations of a biopolitical state, he “shifts our attention to the medicolegal amendments surrounding brain death and rights of personhood” ( Datta 170 ).He notices that brain death which is the “only rigorous

criteria of death and is, accordingly, substituted for systematic or somatic death, which is now considered to be insufficient“( 162 ) gives rise to the contradictory assertion of physical death that follow brain death. Brain death, according to Agamben , is the sole criteria for mortality as “ brain is the one organ that can’t be transplanted ... brain death would ... cease to be death on the day on which the first brain transplant were performed.” (163) However, the concept of death, in Padmanabhan, is bewildering as it is shown in the reply of Virgil :

Jaya : But you’re not here !And he’s dead ... isn’t he? The one to whom this...body belonged?

Virgil : Depends. On how you define death.

Jaya : There’s only one way to define death !

Virgil: Not where I live . The body you knew is still alive. He waswilling to sell and I was willing to buy . ( Padmanabhan 240 )

Therefore , Agamben rightly contends , “ Death , in this way , becomes an epiphenomenon of transplant technology “ ( 163 ).

Padmanabhan situates the technocratic society in her play which forces us to view biotechnological advances that preys upon the third world whose inhabitants are the suppliers of the spare body parts to the first world. By the Act II

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

of the play, Ma has lost her connection with the family members, completely mesmerized by the new life of richness provided by the first world patrons. The room of the family household has been transformed with ultra-modern gadgets that Ginni has arranged for them in exchange of their organs – “TV set , computer terminal , mini – gym , an air – conditioner , the works“ ( 227 ).Ma’s unresisting acceptance of the new lifestyle shows Ma is the perfect receiver of Ginni’s presents, the life of unrestrained consumption that late capitalism advertises. Cary Wolfe discusses the idea of ethics in bioethics and the “medico – administrative “ knowledge which tends to supervise and control ways of living(53). In *Harvest*, an example of such curative, restorative direction occurs in the form of Super Deluxe Video Couch. Once Ma enters into the cube, the device takes responsibility of entertaining her with seven hundred and fifty channels with “ ten modes, seventeen frequencies , three sub – strate couplers, extra – sensory feedback “ that keeps changing by scanning the desires of the mind , where hunger , bodily pains are eradicated but individuality and emotion is completely hacked”( Padmanabhan 236 ). Padmanabhan’s play depicts a future where the bioethical discussions initiated by biomedical technologies have been vanquished. In this play, the depicted future, where the utilitarian and neo – liberal standards succeeds in commoditizing the human body. Om’s

employment contract is the selling of his own body along with the toil, the body is capable of performance for the customer. In *Harvest*, the role of technology can never be underestimated, because, in this play, new techniques are repeatedly shown to be wielded and dominated by the first world buyer , but we cannot forget that Ginni, the false simulation , creates a donor mentality in Om and Jeetu through her ability of purchasing technologies that allow her to do so.

Foucault discusses about Jeremy Bentham’s notion of Panopticon – “the architectural layout of a prison where the guards reside within a central tower and maintain surveillance over all inmates– which does far more than structure of the building” ( Brunon-Ernst 119). Foucault argues, “the major effect of the Panopticon [ was ] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 228 ). The regular monitoring of the contact module in Om’s household enables Ginni not only to intrude in the third world, without ever having physically travelled in the geographical location ,but , it is even more effectual because only the recipient is able to operate it at will. Ginni’s strategy of surveillance makes the donors self – disciplined. As Om is seen panicking because the family is late for lunch, that is also consists of the multi – coloured

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

nutritional pellets – instead of any other food, provided for them by the Inter Planta Services – “You know how [ Ginni ] hates it when we’re late to eat “, Om says , worriedly” ( Padmanabhan 238 ). Om and his entire family police their own behaviour for the fear of Ginni’s cancellation of contract with them. The Panopticon “automatizes and disindividualizes power so that no individual wield or command it”(Foucault , *Discipline and Punish*, 240). Thus, the mechanism of surveillance is used to control the donor subjects and force them for submission to the dominating receivers.

Ginni finally reveals to be Virgil in disguise, the first world receiver, eager to live perpetually, one among the people who have “ lost the art of having children “, and keep on buying human bodies as long as they can afford it , as Virgil says , “ This is my fourth body in fifty years” (Padmanabhan 250). The miserable day arrives when the agents of Inter Planta Services came to fetch Om for his first organ transplant, following the order of Virgil. Because Om hides in their new toilet and the agents seize Jeetu, Om’s brother, by forcing the anesthetic injection in his body so that he cannot resist the agents. Tortured and humiliated, Jeetu returns after his surgery with two “ enormous goggles , created to look like a pair of imitation eyes” ( Padmanabhan 248 ), in the place of his own eyes and is rejected of the basic rights

of human being, as Jeetu utters in frustration “ I can’t sleep,I can’t dream, I can’t even cry” (Padmanabhan 239). But in spite of this Jeetu has been fooled by the seductive image of the buyer Ginni (Virgil), who impels Jeetu to promise that he will do whatever Ginni wants of him, which ultimately results in the agreement of Jeetu to the second phase of transplant. As Foucault describes, in *Discipline and Punish*, that,” unlike a sovereign – judicial power, disciplinary power is not the brute fact of the domination of the one over the many, or of one group over another, but the multiple forms of domination that can be exercised in society; so not the king in his central position ; not sovereignty in its one edifice, but the multiple subjugations that take place and function within the social body” ( 330 ). In *Harvest*, instead of applying coercive force, tempting by the woman’s fascinating image, Virgil is able to dominate over the two brothers, where Jeetu cannot control himself from going to her “ She’s a goddess and she exists. I would do anything for her – anything” (241). Virgil masked as Ginni has stretched his destructive hands to Om also. Om with his deep desire to meet Ginni determines to sell his own body for Ginni , after his brother Jeetu has already been taken away for the transplantation of his entire body. Thus , the Contact Module helps Ginni to kill two birds with one stone – she has been supplied with not one , but two willing donors , while only Om has made the



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

contract of organ selling with the Inter Planta Services. The notion of biopower is reflected in Ginni's treatment of Om and his family. While depicting the omnivorous nature of the first world, the play offers a Foucauldian reading which helps the reader to understand the deeper insights of the play. Sojan has pointed out,

“The third world which is lagging far behind the first world in terms of technology, education, healthcare etc., has to confront the neo – imperialistic powers' strategic moves to keep them under the stewardship of the first world. On confronting this strategic moves the third world often fails to differentiate the friends from the foe and hence succumbs easily to most of these strategies even without a mild resistance.”( 881)

Although resistance is hard to imagine, but the character of Jaya who represent the new age woman of a third world country, in the play *Harvest*, posits a kind of resistance against the first world exploitation. Jaya is introduced in the play as the most sensible member in the family who from the beginning tries to save the family from the impending doom. After Om has abandoned Jaya, for willfully donating his body to Ginni, the final act of the play presents Jaya on stage. Virgil, the first world receiver, now designs to prey upon

the body of Jaya by implanting his seeds in Jaya's womb by virtual sex. For Virgil, Jaya's value lies in her reproductive capacities. Virgil wants to interpolate Jaya as an eager gestational surrogate, just as he had interpellated Om and Jeetu. But Jaya refuses the illusion of virtual sex by demanding that Virgil must come to her in person crossing the disease-free environment of the first world for the real physical contact if he wants to have a child with her – “ I know you're stronger than me, you're richer than me. But if you want me you must risk your skin for me” ( Padmanabhan 248 ). As Ramachandran explains : “Jaya's demand that Virgil upset the balance by eliminating the space ( both symbolic and physical ) between them, so that she can ‘ feel a real weight upon me ‘, is a demand for recognition as an equal subject, worthy of being dignified by the acknowledgement of her particularity“( 171 ). Thus, Jaya poses a challenge to the first world. But Jaya's resistance reaches the highest when by a broken piece of glass she threatens to kill herself as Virgil sends the employees of Inter Planta to break the door of Jaya and force her to comply. She has discovered “ a new definition for winning, winning by losing”, she states, “ I win if you lose... If you want to play games with people, you should be careful not to push them off the board. You pushed me too far. Now there's nothing left for me to lose ... I am not willing to care take my body for your sake ! The only thing I have left which

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

is still mine is death. My death and my pride.” ( Padmanabhan 248 ).Jaya is the embodiment of resistance, she is proud of her identity, as she warns Virgil “ I ‘ m holding a piece of glass against my throat “ ( Padmanabhan 248 ) , she reclaims the right of her own body through suicide which Virgil and the other first world receivers seek to snatch from them. But where the death of the target of millennial capitalism is necessary, is it correct of being depicted as an act of resistance?

Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* not only illuminates the exploitation of third world bodies in the market of organ trade but also unveils the strategies of biopolitics that intrude into the cultural and social spaces of the third world countries and control their internal affairs. Literature reflects society - the increasing threats of organ-donation mafias in the contemporary society is shown in this play. This business of organ trade could flourish only because of the technological advances in the new times as the invisible penetration of the technical gadgets in the daily life of the third world forced them on selling various parts of their body to the first world citizens to satisfy their cannibalistic quest to hang on to youth. Through the management of population and disciplining the individual bodies, biopower attempts to produce more docile workers. Padmanabhan reiterates the various ways in which global capitalism not

only creates the open market of organ trading in India but also controls the sexuality, productivity and lifestyles of its citizens. Jaya is the only character who resists against the selfish motives of the American buyer Virgil by reclaiming her right on her body through killing herself. For a third world subject this is the best possible mode of resistance considering this particular situation. Jaya is presented as one who parades resistance against all forms of domination of the Inter Planta Services and maintains the family bond by overcoming different sorts of temptations.

By exploring the numerous ways in which Padmanabhan’s play illuminate and is illuminated by theories of biopower , this paper has shown the necessity of biopolitical literary criticism to literary studies and academic inquiry into biopolitics alike. Through biopolitical literary criticism, Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* offers a warning for the people across globe against the first world’s exploitation and commoditization of the bodies of third world people. However, the play ends in giving hope that the threats of organ trade and exploitation could be resisted by some conscientious individuals like Jaya who is the representative of new age woman of a third world country.

References

Agamben , Georgio. *Homo Sacer : Sovereign Power and Bare Life.*



RESEARCH ARTICLE

- Translated by Daniel Heller – Roazen, Stanford & California : Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Brunon-Ernst, A. *Beyond Foucault: New Perspectives on Bentham's Panopticon*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.
- Datta, Asijit. "Cadavers, Transactions and Birth of Knowledge: Scanning Disposable Bodies in Padmanabhan's Harvest and the Visible Human Project". *PostScriptum : An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1. 2020, pp. 167 – 177. [www.postscriptum.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/pS5.iAsijit](http://www.postscriptum.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/pS5.iAsijit). Accessed 7 June, 2021.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison*. New York : Vintage Books, 1995.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York : Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended : Lectures at the College De France, 1975 – 76*. New York : Picador, 2003.
- Mathur, Suchitra. "Caught Between the Goddess and the Cyborg : Third – World Women and the Politics of Science in Three Works of Indian Science Fiction." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2004, pp. 119 – 138.
- Padmanabhan, M., " Harvest " , *Postcolonial Plays : An Anthology*. edited by H. Gilbert, New York : Routledge, 2001 ( 1997 ), pp. 217 – 250.
- Pavinchandra, Shital. *Inhuman Transactions ? Representing the Commodification of Human Body Parts*. Diss. Cornell University, 2009. Web. Accessed 7 June, 2021.
- Ramachandran, Ayesha. "New World, No World : Seeking Utopia in Padmanabhan's Harvest". *Theatre Research International*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2005, pp. 161 – 174.
- Scheper – Hughes, N., " The Global Traffic in Human Organs ". *Current Anthropology*. vol.41, no. 2, 2000, pp. 191 – 224.
- Smart, Barry. *Michel Foucault*, USA : Routledge. 2002.
- Sojan, Abin. " Marauding Capitalism and the Marginalized People : A Contemporary Reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest". *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol.6, no.1. 2018, pp. 879 – 881. [www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1705132.pdf](http://www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1705132.pdf), Accessed 7 June. 2021.
- Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism*. Minneapolis & London : University of Minnesota Press, 2010.