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Bodies, Borders and Broken Futures: Dystopian Culture in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

K. Mrunalini

Assistant Professor of English, Department of Applied Sciences and Humanities, MVS Engineering College, Nadargul,
mrunalini_sh@mvsrec.edu.in

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construct of dystopian culture in the Indian English writing in the light of the study of the play entitled *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan for which she won the Onassis Prize for Theatre (1997). The play is set in the near future of Bombay in 2010, a world where poor Indian bodies are 'rented', monitored and ultimately stripped for the benefit of a wealthy, unseen client in the West, enabling a worldwide organ-trading industry to thrive. While the Anglo-American dystopian fiction generally presents totalitarian states or environmental disaster, Padmanabhan is situated in the home interior of a lower-middle class apartment in Bombay where the family is the place of biopolitical extraction. It maintains that *Harvest* plays with the icons of Western dystopian and science fiction literature to epitomise very specifically postcolonial fears: the fetishization of the Third World body, the postcentric decline of family and sexual autonomy in corporate vision and management, and the domestication of nationhood under transnational capital. The research relies on textual analysis (with the aid of postcolonial theory, biopolitics, and feminist criticism) to investigate the central devices of the play: the Contact Module, the videocouch, and the donor recipient's disembodied voice of Ginni, as they represent technology as a new tool for colonial control, not liberation. The three research questions guiding the inquiry concern the indigenisation of the dystopian genre in the play, the staging of the body as contested postcolonial space, and the troubling of the logic of commodification by the figure of Jaya and the theme of gender and desire. The paper suggests that Padmanabhan's dystopia is a critical text about the unevenness of globalisation and provides Indian English literature with a language of imagining the future that is always tied to the unresolvable violences of the colonial past.

The paper uses the terms dystopian literature, Indian English drama, Manjula Padmanabhan, *Harvest*, postcolonialism, biopolitics, globalisation, organ trade, science fiction and gender.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, dystopian literature has been considered a literature of the West, stemming from Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to the more recent *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. These texts are envisioning centralised state apparatuses, mass surveillance, and the disappearance of individual will, and are usually set against a backdrop of a fully actualised alternate society. Born in a completely different historical narrative from the colonial, partition and uneven globalisation, Indian English literature has given us a body of speculative and dystopian texts that have been appropriated from and significantly reworked along these Western templates. Unlike dystopian authors in the west who constructed entirely new dystopian worlds, Indian dystopian writers often take the anxieties of dystopia and make them sit on familiar domestic and national sites creating a dystopia of proximity: a dystopia that is disturbingly like the present and not as radically different from it.

The following is one of the more noteworthy and widely discussed examples of this indigenised dystopian imagination, in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*. The play was written in 1997, and won the Onassis Prize for Theatre in 1997, thus being set in a future that at the time of writing was not much more than a decade away—namely, in Bombay in the year 2010. The film is about Om Prakash, an unemployed young man who enters a contract with a mysterious multinational named InterPlanta Services for the sale of his organs to a well-heeled first world client. In return, his family his mother, his wife Jaya and, later, his brother Jeetu, get a videocouch, a Contact Module, running water and a standard of material comfort that he can only have dreamed of. The generous arrangement gradually turns into a totalising system of surveillance and extraction: the family's cramped one room tenement is invaded by surveillance technology, their bodies are constantly under medical examination, the autonomy of their bodies is gradually taken away, all in the name of protecting the "donor" body that sustains the life of the recipient body on the other side of the world.

The difference between the *Harvest* dystopias and the canonical Western dystopias is that the critique of the dystopia in *Harvest* is never abstracted into a nameless totalitarian state. The play's antagonist is never a visible government or dictator—it is a corporation, InterPlanta, with its representatives seldom seen or spoken to outside the screen; and its ultimate client, the older American woman, Ginni, seems to the family only as a seductive voice and face on the videocouch. It is a shift of power from the state to the corporation, from the visible to the virtual that is clearly postcolonial and post-liberalisation anxiety. The play was written in the years that followed the economic liberalisation of India after 1991, when the liberalisation of Indian markets and economies with the western world economy brought with it a host of debates and controversies over the implications of the benefits and

costs of economic integration. In one of the most extreme scenarios that one could imagine, the only thing India has to offer the rest of the world is its own flesh and blood – the element of human bodies – which is the subject of the drama *Harvest*.

The play's dystopian vision is also a part of its engagement of the body as a site of exploitation and resistance. But unlike most western dystopian literature, where the threat to the individual is largely psychological and ideological – the altering of history, the elimination of language, the production of consent – *Harvest*'s horror is grounded in the flesh. Organs are taken, youth is taken, even reproduction is stolen when the secret of Ginni's plan is revealed, as she plans to use Jeetu's youth to father a child with Jaya, which she will inhabit via a machine that will carry the pregnancy. The play thus depicts what postcolonial and biopolitical thinkers have termed the "bare life" of colonised or economically submissive populations — the life of bodies whose worth is only as an organ in the service of more powerful bodies.

It is also pertinent to note that it is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a larger, though still relatively small, collection of Indian Speculative and Dystopian literature that has expanded significantly since the 1990s. In her later novels (*Escape*, 2008; *The Island of Lost Girls*, 2015), Padmanabhan again found herself able to write in the dystopian realm, continuing the themes of *Harvest* to a feminist dystopia that centered on female infanticide and the struggle for sexed survival in a future India that was essentially devoid of females. Other Indian authors in English and in translation, from Amitav Ghosh's speculative and apocalyptic fiction to the recent addition to Indian climate fiction and techno-dystopia, have also explored anxieties which are different from, but sometimes similar to, those of their Western counterparts: environmental disaster exacerbated by extreme inequality, the persistence of caste hierarchy in ostensibly postcolonial institutions, and the fragility of the postcolonial nation-state under transnational corporate control. In part because it was one of the earliest Indian English texts to use the formal resources of science fiction — a genre that had a relatively minor role in Indian English letters until the 1990s — but more because it was one of the first Indian English works to employ the genre to a sustained social and political critique. The emphasis of this paper is on the context of the play in the context of Indian dystopian culture, and to explore the formal and thematic shifts as they represent an Indian response to globalisation, technology and the postcolonial body. It is divided in five parts. This introduction is followed by a statement of three research questions that will be addressed in the study. It then explains the qualitative research method that was used, which is based on text. The analysis section analyzes the play in relation to the five interrelated dimensions: dystopian domestic space, the economics of neocolonial extraction, technology and surveillance, gender, desire and resistance, and an ambivalent utopia. Finally, these themes converge to suggest that *Harvest* provides an alternate vocabulary that allows Indian English literature to envision dystopic futures which are firmly rooted in the un-resolved inequalities of the postcolonial present.

2. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

How does Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* translate and indigenise the Western dystopian and science fiction style to specifically draw in postcolonial concerns in India related to globalisation and economic liberalism?

2. How does the play represent the human body — and the poor body of the Third World, in particular — as a location of dystopian exploitation, and what does this show about the biopolitics of the global organ trade as a metaphor for the neocolonial relations?

3. How do concepts of gender, desire, and domestic space interact in the play's dystopian design, and how does Jaya challenge and/or hinder the logic of commodity to which the other characters adhere?

4. How do technological artefacts like the Contact Module and the videocouch re-imagine authority, surveillance, and intimacy in the dystopian household of the play?

3. Research Method

This study is of a qualitative interpretive type of research which utilizes close reading of text and existing critical and theoretical work. The main text that is explored is Manjula Padmanabhan's not a performance analysis of the text, but rather in terms of the dramaturgical and literary construction of dystopian culture, in the published playtext form itself, *Harvest* (Kali for Women, 1997). It brings together three strands of complementary analysis.

Although the study focuses on the dystopian world created in the play, it does so by means of an incremental approach to world-building that emphasizes the play's structure, dialogue, stage directions, and recurring symbols, such as the Contact Module, the videocouch, and the sarcophagus-like Interface Module in which Om's body is eventually locked, thereby tracing the ways in which the play constructs its dystopian world.

Secondly, the paper involves this close reading in a theoretical context from postcolonial studies and biopolitics. Challenging the concept of biopower with that of Giorgio Agamben on bare life, it examines the way the play stages the disintegration of marginalized bodies that are of no economic value from a medical and commercial point of view. It also reads the *InterPlanta* contract in a way that is informed by postcolonial theorisations of neocolonialism and globalisation, in particular by the theories on the international division of labour and the commodification of bodies from the third world in bioprospecting and organ markets.

Third, it addresses feminist literary criticism by examining the character of Jaya and her play's exploration of the desire, reproduction, and resistance of the genders, with her journey being part of a larger conversation on women's agency in Indian dystopian and speculative writings.

The paper also refers to secondary scholarship on Harvest studies that have engaged with the play, already conducted through the lens of utopia, performance, techno-violence and the science-fictionalisation of globalisation, in order to position the analysis within the framework of an ongoing critical conversation, rather than an isolated encounter with the play. Such an interplay of close reading, theory and secondary scholarship makes it possible for this paper to develop a multi-layered argument for this significance of the play in the broader context of dystopian culture in Indian writing. The method is restricted to the study of one primary text and the analysis of its dystopian nature, rather than making any attempt at a comparative survey of the various dystopian texts in the Indian context, which is explained explicitly in the concluding section as a research opportunity.

4. Analysis

4.1 *Dystopian Space and the Politics of the Domestic Interior.*

The Politics of the Domestic Interior – Dystopian Space.

Harvest's most impressive formal decision is her rejection of the sprawl and world-building scale that is characteristic of dystopian fiction. The entire action of the play takes place in one room, the room that Om, his mother and Jaya share, and that by the close of the play is thoroughly colonized by outsiders. The way this dystopian horror is confined to a fully developed interior, instead of a complete alternate society, is a major twist from the Western roots of the genre. While in Oceania or Gilead, Orwell's or Atwood's dystopia is discernable in the wide social, political and geographic detail, Padmanabhan's dystopia is legible almost entirely through the mutation of a single house.

This choice is significant for the way the play develops its critique. The play does not seek to bring its audiences into the world of dystopia, but to make them see this place, a place already in existence, a place of our times, of urban India, of a precarious economy, of the informal, of the global infiltration of private life, as an intensification of the conditions already present. Having InterPlanta's representatives or even, later, the videocouch and the Contact Module does not bring the family into a new world, but makes evident how completely their familiar world has already been available to appropriation. It's the dystopia of addition, that is, new technologies and new kinds of surveillance are merely added onto the already fragile domestic space, revealing its fragility but not creating an alien one.

The stage directions repeatedly stress the transition of the room from filth to 'hospital' cleanliness that occurs as the Guards and apparatus of medicine take over. This change is offered as a loss of control over one's personal environment, comfort being offered in exchange for confinement, most obviously in the case of Om, who is no longer allowed to wander free, he is no longer allowed to pollute himself, he is no longer allowed to be in danger, his body is no longer his own, but a resource in trust for his future possessor. The interior of the house then is a miniature panopticon, similar to Foucault's description of disciplinary space, and the sense of being seen and of being always in danger of being seen leads to self-regulation even when no one is explicitly watching.

The social and economic impact of organ trading and its globalisation with a focus on neocolonialism.

On the plot level, there's a contract: Om will sell his organs to InterPlanta Services for the security of his family's material needs. This transactional approach enables the play to become an allegory narrating a new form of economic relations that is coming to be known as neocolonialism in the age of globalisation. InterPlanta's agents never state what organs will be removed, or when, or how; the family lives under a contract whose exact terms it never knows, similar to the asymmetries of knowledge and power that are common in many real-life scenarios of multinational companies and the communities whose resources or labor they are taking.

It's important that the organ trade is the play's central conceit because it breaks the metaphorical barrier between economics criticism and a sense of what it's like to be human. In other dystopian/postcolonial texts, the object exploited may be labour, land, or nature, but Padmanabhan makes the body itself the object of exploitation, thus rendering visible the sometimes hidden bodies of the global economy. The family's impoverishment is so profound that their bodies are literally their only product they can sell — a distorting, almost literal, of a debate in the 1990s that asked if developing economies were becoming sources of 'cheap labour and raw materials' for richer ones. This reading is supported by the play's setting — Bombay, India's main commercial hub that epitomises the modernisation of India — in which the family's flesh is made exportable.

This is a critique that is compounded by the lack of visibility of InterPlanta's ultimate beneficiaries. Throughout the play, the family is unaware of the recipient's identity, nationality, and even gender who will reap the benefits from Om's organs; this is the asymmetry that dramatizes how the global supply chains are obscuring the human relationships behind economic exchange, allowing consumers in rich countries to profit from labour and resources from the third world without facing the reality of the human costs. Ginnie, the final recipient, however, is not a bad guy or a blank slate — when she finally reveals herself as an elderly American woman who comes in via videocouch, the play personalises this exchange and only increases the horror — Ginni is not evil nor is she entirely without feeling — she is loving, even maternal towards the family and yet that love is not an extraction but only worsens the extraction. This makes it hard to make the play just a simple allegory on the wrongdoings of individual actors, implying that the neocolonial system it exposes does not need bad individual actors, but is maintained by the structural inequality that makes even the most loving relationships exploitable.

4.2 *The consequences of technology, surveillance and the loss of autonomy.*

Unlike techno-utopian stories where technology is shown as either neutral or liberating, in Harvest there is no portrayal of technology. Each new gadget that enters the home of the family, on the contrary, serves at the same time as a comfort and as a control device. The Contact Module is the new front

door for the family, as InterPlanta communicates instructions and tracks the family's adherence to directives through this module, all contact to the outside world is going through a corporate-controlled module. The videocouch brings coloniser and colonised together, rich and poor together, but also means the family can be watched, called upon and directed; they can't watch her back, call her, or direct her.

This asymmetric visibility is a key element of the critique of surveillance technology in the play. The family is placed under constant surveillance by InterPlanta's Guards and medical staff, who check not only Om's physical condition, but also the cleanliness and diet of the household and the emotional atmosphere, because it can affect the donor organs. When the term 'surveillance' is used in this way, it is not just the body that is under surveillance: it is the whole of domestic life, as biopolitical control of the body of a population is inevitably accompanied by control over behaviour, environment, and intimate relationships. The ultimate surrender of the mother to a drugged state and a televisual passivity, the day spent in the comfort of the videocouch, literalises the suggestion of the play that technological comfort, in this dystopian economy, is a form of pacification: dulling resistance, while satisfying material needs.

Significant is that the play does not portray this technological intrusion as an entirely exogenous imposition on Indian society, but extrapolates from familiar contemporary concerns of television, consumerism and privacy loss which were a part of the Indian experience of media liberalisation during the 90s. In this context, Harvest's science-fictional structures serve more as satire than as outright speculation, as is the fashion of dystopian fiction, which extrapolates the contemporary tendencies rather than purely invents the unusual.

4.3 Gender, Desire and Resistance: The Figure of Jaya

Jaya's role among the characters in the play is a particularly resistant one in the overall dystopian logic of the play. As his mother Om and later Jeetu get more and more enveloped in the world of contracts and watchfulness, Jaya always speaks her doubts, her anger and her refusal. Her initial instincts about the contract, her resentment at the imposition of the Guards and her later romance with Jeetu make her a character who defies the passivity of the family. While the play's critique of the dystopian world is more directly addressed through Om's body, from a feminist perspective, Jaya's situation is defined by the play's commodifying logic; she is a woman whose body is also implicitly up for sale, first for domestic labor, and then for use like a vessel in the hands of a machine, with Jeetu's youthful body serving as the surrogate in Ginni's plan.

The play's critique of the economy of commodities is extended to the economy of reproduction and desire, when the revelation of Ginni's desire to live in a new body, partly constructed from Jeetu's youth, implies that the dystopian economy that the play portrays does not end at the extraction of organs, but also extends to intimacy, desire, generational futurity. Jaya's affair with Jeetu is at the same time a real statement of desire outside of the sanctioned framework of the contract, but also is a vulnerability that the omnipotent corporate system can easily detect, monitor and use for its own purposes. This ambivalence is typical of the play's broader antagonism to 'solution'; the very resistance is 'readable' and 'useable' in the entirety of the system.

Despite this, however, Jaya's eventual disavowal of their collaboration, and the play's closing moment of her unbroken defiance, has been interpreted by critics as leaving a fragile utopian residue in the play's dystopian shell; that even at the level of the total system of extraction, the individual will and desire to refuse remains, albeit in a circumscribed way. This opposition between a totalizing system and what remains, a likeable resistance, places Harvest in a larger tradition of feminist dystopian literature, whose final front for resistance is the reproductive and sexual autonomy of women.

4.4 Naming, Language and Satirical Register

The play is carefully calibrated throughout with a satirical tone and the use of the same names and terms to reinforce the dystopian critique. The name of the corporation, InterPlanta Services, is an amalgamation of the language of interplanetary science fiction and the more prosaically agricultural term "planting"—a pairing that literally embodies the play's chief metaphor, that of human bodies as plants grown for a faraway market. The bureaucratic, euphemistic language of the representatives of InterPlanta — "donation," "procurement" and "contact" for organ removal, for example, instead of "extraction" or "sale"— would reflect the real-world context of the play, in which Padmanabhan has mentioned that the common clinical term "harvest" was also used for organ removal, but has been replaced by the still more euphemistic "procurement". This awareness of the euphemistic evolution of institutional language places this play within a long tradition of dystopian fiction, from Orwell's Newspeak to the present day, in which the manipulation of the language is a major tool of ideological control—here, not at the governmental level, but in the case of Padmanabhan at the corporate level.

The family members are also named symbolically: Om, meaning sacred Hindu syllable representing cosmic totality, through the play is a fragmented, monitored body; Jaya, meaning "victory," is the character who most tenaciously refuses to give way to the totality of the system, but whose victories are never decisive or definitive. That this symbolic naming is counterbalanced by a lack of circumstance is typical of the play's overall satirical approach, as its often-forced comparison of high-scale technological and economic plans with the limited, constrained lives of those who suffer the consequences.

4.5 The Absent Utopia and the Play's Formal Strategies

Critics have commented on the tension in Harvest between dystopian criticism and a lingering utopian hope. The play neither mocks nor dismisses the family's original hope that the InterPlanta contract will get them out of poverty, which is a perfectly reasonable and understandable utopian wish. This is a wish which is slowly and slowly exposed as impossible to maintain in the context of the contract conditions, but this dream is not met with a different one of collective liberation, rather, the audience is left with the image of an irresolution, Om's body trapped in the Interface Module, Jaya's future left in question, Ginni's world completely untouchable by the family.

This resistance to narrative closure alone is a major formal ploy. Harvest doesn't offer any kind of redemptive conclusion where the family can somehow repair or correct the system that's exploiting them; it's not something they can simply do individually. The play is in this regard distinct from some western dystopian stories, which are often grim but have a protagonist who gains a personal awakening or rebellion, providing some sort of narrative satisfaction for the reader. Instead, the conclusion of Padmanabhan is more disturbingly ambiguous in that it seems to offer a more realistic view of the nature of inequalities that the play condemns; it is not just one's own guilt but the structural inequalities as well.

The play's dark humor, including the satirical reference to the name of the corporation, the absurdities in the portrayal of the Guards, and the vitriolic rhetoric of the dialogue, further sets the tone for a dystopian satire, rather than a simple tragedy. This register of tone lets the play condemn its objects – global capital, consumerism and the culpability of ordinary individuals in systems of exploitation – without lapsing into didacticism, drawing the audience to reflect on disturbing parallels between the play's extreme future and their own.

5. Conclusion

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* stands as one of the most significant contributions to dystopian culture in Indian English writing precisely because it refuses to simply transplant Western dystopian conventions onto an Indian setting. In contrast, the play indigenises the genre by shifting dystopia from the level of the totalitarian state to that of the postcolonial house and from ideological control to bodily and economic extraction. The international organ trade is the central theme of the play, which constitutes a sustained allegory about neocolonial globalisation, where the poor body is the remaining means of exchange in an unequal world economy. Its technological infrastructure, comprising the Contact Module, the videocouch, and the Interface Module, is a theatrical enactment of the communicative and cosy nature of surveillance as a device of control, extending biopolitical management from the body into the whole of domestic life.

We can now return to the play's guiding research questions and see how the analysis fits into the answers to these questions: How does the dystopian genre get indigenised in the play, whose speculative premise is grounded in familiar anxieties of the post-liberalisation era, instead of being based on an unfamiliar alternate world? How does the play theorize the Third World body as a site of biopolitical extraction, whose value is only substantive to more powerful global entities, as theoretical accounts of bare life and neocolonial economic relations do? How does the play complicate its own totalizing system by affirming a fragile, contested terrain of resistance, while at the same time staking the claim of its resistance to be vulnerable to the appropriation of the more powerful global entities? The technological devices addressed in the fourth research question do not appear as background props but as pivotal tools that facilitate the play as an examination of the loss of privacy, autonomy and intimacy in the face of transnational capitalism.

Taken as a whole, this research indicates that dystopian culture in Indian writing is a critical one, which breaks away from its western counterpart: by rejecting the comforting distance of place and time. While dystopic fiction by Orwell and Huxley generally encourages readers to view the evils they describe safely located elsewhere, Padmanabhan's dystopia asserts the continuity between the here and now of economic liberalisation and the somewhat hyperbolic future it imagines. This has wider implications for Indian English literature's engagement with the genre as a whole: dystopian literature in India is often more about a heightened, defamiliarising lens on the current structural inequalities in caste, class, gender and global economic power.

What is important to stress, however, is that the play's dystopian power isn't achieved through a single scare or plot twist, but through the step-by-step, almost mundane nature of how its horrors are introduced: The family's gradual, incremental acceptance of the surveillance, confinement, and loss of their bodies is a metaphor for the way in which real populations often come to terms with encroaching structural inequality, not via a dramatic confrontation, but via an incremental, often imperceptible accommodation. Perhaps this is the most striking lesson in the play for readers of dystopian literature in general: that dystopia does not declare itself to its inhabitants, but manifests as something else – an improvement, an opportunity, or a gesture of generosity – before the inhabitants can rally to its cause with much success.

It is important to remember that, as with all studies, this one has only been taken up in one text and has been examined in a theoretical and close reading manner rather than a comparative style. A future study could also be conducted to examine how *Harvest* relates to other Indian dystopian and speculative works of fiction, including Padmanabhan's own later novel *Escape*, The Island of Lost Girls, Amitav Ghosh's speculative fiction, and more recent Indian science fiction and climate fiction, as it would be interesting to explore the development of an Indian dystopian fiction and its unique relationship with global genre conventions. This comparative exercise would enable to determine if the strategies that have been pointed out in this study – the domestication of dystopian space, the emphasis on the body as the economic resource, and the ambivalent portrayal of resistance in the form of gendered desire – are prevalent in the Indian dystopian literature or specific to the literary and historical era of Padmanabhan. The present analysis, however, makes it clear that Indian English Literature has an everlasting yet disturbing future vocabulary: a vocabulary in which the body and not the state is the main theatre where the violences of global inequality are played out and, at best, resisted.

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