

Economic Exploitation in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Abstract

This essay offers a reading of Indian writer Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian play *Harvest*. The trade in human organs and the commoditization of the third world body that such a trade is predicated upon. Padmanabhan's play, an unemployed Indian man sells the rights to his body parts to a buyer in the United States, pointedly critiques the commoditization of the healthy third-world body. Wealthy ailing patients in the first world are increasingly turning to healthy if the economical poverty stricken populations of the third world in order to procure 'spare' body parts. It is tempting at first glance to read this illicit global economy as yet another example of the exploitation of the third world bodies that global capitalism gives rise to. Unlike the commodity exported from an exploitative third world sweatshop, the organ is not produced by the third world body but extracted from it. Typical located in the third world such production sites displace human labour to remote geographical locations allowing for industrial production to become increasingly less visible in the first world. The first world on the other hand sees a proliferation of service economies.

Keywords: Manjula Padmanabhan, *Harvest*, economic, exploitation. healthy, poverty, body, organs.

Though Padmanabhan has used a futuristic space to depict the deprivations faced by the poor city dwellers in the twenty-fifth century, the idea for *Harvest* was the outcome of a visit to her sister in Chennai. She was confronted with the brutal reality of the trade in human organs on a morning walk around the town. Poverty is one of the major issues in the third world. Many socio economic studies on Indian cities are available but they are not directly poverty related studies. Major causes of urban poverty turn out to be unemployment, underemployment in a number of low productivity occupations, employment and low wages. In cities the majority among the poor population are the migrant workers. *Harvest* presents the dreadful consequences of poverty such as over population, organ selling, prison like incarceration, partiality of parents towards bread earners, artificial insemination, and the exploitation of women. This act of organ

selling also brings to the fore the ethical question of use and abuse of human body of both male and female persons. Rather than justifying the point of organ selling, Padmanabhan depicts it as one of the bitter realities of the modern third world.

At the superficial level the play is about Om Prakash who loses his job while living in a one bedroom apartment with his family. He decides to sell unspecified organs through a company called InterPlanta Service to a rich person, Ginni in the United States. He becomes rich quick. InterPlanta and the recipient are obsessed with, maintaining Om's health and therefore control the lives of Om, his mother Ma, and wife Jaya in their one room apartment. The recipient, Ginni, periodically looks in on them via a videophone and treats them condescendingly. First Om's volunteers to meet Ginni, has been projected as enticing white woman. The underlying theme of the play carries deep meaning and constitutes the substance of the play. It is a parable of contemporary social scenario of the third world countries and specifically of India as the organ trading is prevalent due to increasing demand for donated organs, high economic profitability and uncontrolled trafficking.

The play opens with the presence of Jaya and her mother-in-law, Ma on stage who is impatiently waiting for Om's return from his job interview. Both are restless, Ma fervently hopes that Om will get employment. Jaya knowing what the job entails hopes that he would not. But Om returns to announce that he has indeed been selected for the 'job' at InterPlanta Service. After passing a fascinating process of medical tests at InterPlanta Services, he has been decreed as an eligible, healthy candidate for selling rights of his entire body to an anonymous buyer in the United States. His confused feelings about signing such a contract allow Padmanabhan to portray the complex mix of hope and despair that has motivated his actions. At first, in ecstasy after getting a job he says,

OM: "We'll have more money than you and I have names for!" he says to Ma, proudly. "Who'd believe there's so much money in the world?" (11)

When his wife expresses her reservations about what he has done, he becomes defensive:

OM: You think I did it lightly. But [...] we'll be rich! Very rich!
Insanely rich! But you'd rather live in this one small room, I suppose!
Think it's such a fine thing- living day in, day out, like monkeys in a hot-case-lulled to sleep by out neighbors' rhythmic farting! [...]
And starving. (23)

Om's final reaction makes clear; his judgment has been severely impaired by the lure of unlimited wealth. When the reality of what he has done hits him, he is terrified "How could I have done this to myself? What sort of fool am I?" (58)

Om is panicking because they are late for lunch. Ironically their lunch consists of the multi-colored nutritional pellets provided to them by InterPlanta Servies. The constant surveillance of Om and his family would help Om to stay healthy. In other words, his good health would ensure that the extraction of the healthiest organs. Ma has become completely addicted to the new life of luxury. She spends most of her time compulsively watching television. When the Gray Guards really come they take Jeetu mistaking him to be Om. Even as the transplant turns out to be a successful Jeetu realize that he has lost the ability to see the real world as his eyes have been gauged out but the programming done in his brain still makes it possible for him to see the beaming video image of Ginni.

Here Jeetu serves a doppelganger for Om by substituting him. Later at the end of the play we see that Jeetu also serves as a doppelganger for Ginni as his whole body is transplanted to keep Ginni alive. While Jeetu happily goes with the InterPlanta Guards, Om tries to convince them that he is real donor. While both the male characters Om and Jeetu in a situation where their maleness is compromised due to their poverty, in a patriarchal society a woman is no more than a 'body' for gratification. Similarly in the play the binaries of male and female shift to third world and the first world where the third world citizens play the role of female shoes main identity is restricted to their body. Om sells his body, Jeetu world as a male prostitutes so both of them are projecting the role change and are projected as female substitutes. The demeaning of the poor citizens does not end are projected as female substitutes. The demeaning of the poor citizens does not end.

Making money. This is the promise that the occult economy of organ trade extends to its objects, sell your organ and you will make more money than you will ever earn through years of toil and labour. The promise of millennial capitalism works because it allows the third world individual to see her body as that which contains a natural 'spare' part, a naturally occurring surplus that is not the product of labour yet is still in high demand. The third-world individual is thus seduced into selling the organs that her body has a 'spare'.

An ideal agrarian economy is sustainable. The organ, once extracted is irreclaimable. While all the donors fall prey to Ginny's tactics, Padmanabhan uses Jaya, the only character in the play, is virulently opposed to Om's decision, to reclaim a human dignity of sorts, a dignity that allows Jaya to resist the lure of money and the seductive escapism of technology.

Harvest poses a potent critique of the first world's exploitation of third world bodies for the commodities of labour power and, as the recently emerged trade in organs shows health. Padmanabhan's notion of winning by losing seems a disturbingly apt way to define the third world individual's predicament lost your own body part to win the case.

Works Cited

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