



AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Navigating Global Capital's Insidious Divide: Socio-Economic Desperation and Resistance in 'Harvest'

Diksha Bharti

PhD Scholar,
Department of English,
Ranchi University, Jharkhand.

&

Dr. Supriya

Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Ranchi Women's College, Jharkhand.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13683927>

Article History: Submitted-19/07/2024, Revised-14/08/2024, Accepted-22/08/2024, Published-31/08/2024.

Abstract:

This paper critically examines Manjula Padmanabhan's play, *Harvest* and her depiction of the discrimination faced by the urban underprivileged at the hands of the urban privileged. Through the analysis, the paper aims to highlight that addressing the pervasive socio-economic class divide in urban India is a primary thematic concern of English plays written by contemporary Indian women playwrights. The paper also posits that plays like *Harvest*, where the conflict's resolution depends on the decision of the female character, widen the spectrum of perspectives and storytelling, marking a transformative shift in the world of dramatic literature.

Keywords: contemporary Indian women playwrights, Manjula Padmanabhan, *Harvest*, socio-economic class divide, urban underprivileged, women characters, agency.

Introduction

Womanist dramaturgy, within the Indian context, like elsewhere around the world, essentially works towards unearthing unique experiences of socially and culturally distinct women

to raise consciousness and improve social conditions for women (Mukherjee 14). However, it is also imperative for critics and scholars to recognize that this sole criterion should not be used for evaluating women's playwriting. In an interview given to Anita Singh, playwright Poile Sengupta highlights this flawed presumption about the thematic bubble of women's playwriting when she remarks that "[she] ha[s] always felt it unfair that women writers are consistently asked to see the world through 'a woman's eyes' and to comment on gender politics. "All creative individuals", remarks Sengupta, "are artists and craftspersons first" (87). Undoubtedly, there is ample textual evidence indicating that plays by Indian women dramatists often address broader socio-economic issues such as class disparity, economic hardship, political dynamics, and cultural conflicts, going beyond gender politics.

Sengupta's observation also aligns with that of Tutun Mukherjee, who in her 2005 anthology *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*, observes some other significant trends in women's playwriting apart from the obvious women-centric issues. According to her, Indian women's playwriting has shown a broad concern with "... exposing hidden aspects of the past and exploring their consequences for contemporary experience; the re-interpretation of history, mythology, and older texts; adaptations of folk themes; the propagation as well as interrogation of ideology; and drama as analysis of culture" (16). Mukherjee's observation that these dramatists are not only concerned with women-centric issues but also with a broader cultural critique is insightful. These dramatists are not only creating stories for the stage with women in subject position. Going beyond the stage, their plays aim to initiate discussions around socially and culturally relevant wider issues, with many of these plays also registering possible solutions that arise from women's unique experiences. That they address socio-economic issues with a woman's consciousness intact, is what makes these narratives special. It is something that one finds lacking in men's playwriting. Contemporary Indian women's playwriting broadens the thematic and dramaturgic scope to include diverse female experiences within socio-political issues.

Transcending linguistic boundaries, Mukherjee's analysis of the major trends in women's playwriting can be applied to English-language plays by contemporary Indian women writers. I propose that Indian women playwrights who write in English use drama to examine the often understated but widely prevalent class-divide in urban spaces in India. Plays such as *Lights Out*

by Manjula Padmanabhan, *Name, Place, Animal, Thing* by Annie Zaidi and *A Pipe Dream in Delhi* by Anuradha Marwah are a few among many such plays by Indian women dramatists whose underlying motive is to expose the discrimination that the urban underprivileged faces at the hands of the urban privileged, that is, the upper-middle class.

In the present paper, Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* is analyzed to propose that the play extends the narrative of class discrimination to a worldwide context, showcasing the biases and prejudices held by First World citizens towards citizens of the Third World, like India. These individuals of the Third World are also marginalized within the urban Indian landscape. However, here their misery ensues from being misunderstood and exploited at the hands of US-based employers, unlike in other plays where both the exploiter and the exploited are Indians. This modern manifestation of the East-West dichotomy, shaped by global capitalism, is often labeled as neo-imperialism or neo-colonialism, yet at its core, it echoes the longstanding disparities between various social strata in India.

Analysis and Discussion

The story of *Harvest* (1996) is set in a futuristic Mumbai (Bombay) of 2010. The main character is Om Prakash, an unemployed slum-dweller in the city, who signs a contract via an agency, InterPlanta Services, to donate unspecified organs of his body to a wealthy buyer from the US in exchange for a hefty sum of money. However, as InterPlanta and the organ recipient exert extreme control over Om and his family, the true implications of the contract become increasingly murky.

The central issue here is capitalism. John and Jean Comaroff argue that capitalism appeals to the underprivileged as a "gospel of salvation...that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and the disempowered" (292). Om's decision to sign a dubious contract with InterPlanta Services without inquiring into its terms and conditions or contract duration testifies to Comaroffs' observation. His mother's concern about the contract's terms falls on deaf ears, for all he knows is that "[they]'ll have more money than...[they] have names for! Who'd believe there's so much money in the world?" (Padmanabhan 208). Om's vulnerability as an unemployed slum-dweller from a Third World country makes him susceptible to exploitation by the First World buyer, inviting reflections on the role of global capital in

deciding the power dynamics between the privileged and the disempowered. According to Sagnika Chanda, global capital exercises its insidious power by creating hierarchies of various forms, such as those between “the impoverished but healthy donor body of the Third World and the wealthy but ailing First World body... the differences between the male and the female body, the aged and the young body and real and the virtual body” (112).

Critics and scholars discuss this kind of money-governed power-play in a global context within the label of 'neo-imperialism'. Neo-imperialism refers to the new forms of cultural hegemony that the US and other major world powers impose on developing nations, including many of the Caribbean, Central American, and South-East Asian nations. In their book *Post Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996), Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins elaborate on the fundamental distinctions between imperialism and neo-imperialism noting that while neo imperialism, like imperialism, denotes unequal power relations between cultures or groups, its methods of operation are typically less formalized than those of imperialism. While the European empires used military force to keep a tight grip on their colonies, neo-imperialism operates more clandestinely. It may involve cultural hegemony, economic pressure, and indirect influence (257).

In *Harvest*, the slum-dwelling Prakash family experiences all these forms of covert pressures. The promise of wealth that would uplift their living standards forever is the economic pressure for them. Padmanabhan highlights the intertwined nature of socio-economic exploitation on local and global levels through this statement of Om where he tells Jaya that he did not have a choice when he signed up for the organ transplantation program:

I went because I lost my job in the company. And why did I lose it? Because I am a clerk and nobody needs clerks any more! There are no new jobs now – there's nothing left for people like us! Don't you know that? There's us – and the street gangs – and the rich. (260-261)

Om's lament reflects the dehumanizing aspects of economic pressure and the societal divide it perpetuates, where the underprivileged face dire decisions without the luxury of choice.

However, the promise of money is not the only means of influence in the play. Their customer Virgil, a male, also exercises indirect influence upon both Om and his brother Jeetu by posing as their glamorous American woman customer named Ginni, beguiling and swaying them

into consensual organ donations. When Interplanta guards come to their home to take away the donor for the transplants, they seem to pick the wrong brother (Jeetu) ‘by accident’. At this point Om does not object and remains in hiding till the guards leave their home. In Act III Scene I, when Jeetu returns, “[i]n the place of his eyes are enormous goggles, created to look like a pair of imitation eyes” (262). For Jeetu, it is like being “...in a place worse than death...” where there are only “[s]cars and slashes against infinite blackness. No stillness, no dimensions. No here, no there” (264). He is devastated by his state and even thinks of destroying his life. However, after a while, Jeetu is surprised as the darkness starts to recede, and he excitedly exclaims upon seeing Ginni fully for the first time. Ginni responds to his excitement with a hint of playfulness in her voice; “[s]ure you can see... That’s what we gave you eyes for” (266). Jeetu is awestruck with her beauty and compares her to magic. Ginni seizes this opportune moment to discuss the next steps in organ transplantation. She demands swift action and support from him to which an entranced and ever compliant Jeetu responds; “[a]nything you want is fine, Ginni” (269). She then suggests calling in the InterPlanta guards immediately, and Jeetu agrees without hesitation to follow her command. All the while, Om keeps interrupting their conversation, trying to make Ginni believe that he is the actual donor they had signed a contract with, and therefore, the guards must take him away and not his brother.

The readiness of the brothers to sacrifice their living parts for a figment reaching them through a Contact Module raises grave concerns about the impact of one’s disadvantaged socio-economic status on one’s autonomy. The brothers’ background as urban slum dwellers shapes their perception of Ginni profoundly. Coming from a marginalized community, with limited exposure to such technology, they view Ginni’s ability to project a video image directly into Jeetu’s mind, as almost magical. She comes across as a figure of authority and influence. This power dynamic creates a sense of awe and trust in Ginni, making them less likely to question her motives or the consequences of their actions. Consequently, their disadvantaged socio-economic position makes them more vulnerable to manipulation and less able to make informed decisions for their interests in the face of Ginni’s persuasive tactics.

In organ donation, the donor’s autonomy and understanding should be paramount. However, Ginni creates a sense of urgency, stating that “time is kind of short, ... and [they] really

have to get a move on" (268), and pressures Jeetu into making decisions without proper time for consideration, reflecting a potential exploitation of Jeetu's lower social position and desperation. Similarly, Ginni's statement, "That's what we gave you eyes for," implies a social hierarchy where the privileged, like Ginni, approach the underprivileged, like Om and his family, with a patronizing attitude. However, it is ironic that there is a transaction involved which cannot be called an exchange of equals. Just on the promise of luxury and comfort for him and his family, Om readily agrees to donate his organs. They forcefully take away Jeetu's natural eyes and induce temporary artificial vision in their place. Nevertheless, Ginni approaches them as a patron, and the whole family complies. The disparity in their knowledge and power arises from their economic conditions.

Here, the concept of cultural hegemony becomes a crucial link to understanding how the power dynamics play out between the dominant and the subordinate groups. Although Antonio Gramsci gave no precise definition of the term, he discussed its characteristics as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (qtd in Lears 568).

In the play, Virgil (Ginni) embodies this hegemonic control. He dominates every aspect of the Prakash family's daily life. From what they can eat to where they go or not go, he surveils everything through her agents of InterPlanta and the Contact Module. Ginni can visit Om's family anytime without warning. They eat jars of colour-coded pellets given to them by the agents as food, as directed by Ginni. Their patron believes that their living conditions and eating habits are too unhygienic, and it may cause her health problems if the donor of organs lives in those environments or eats those foods. Everyone does as commanded. In Act II of the play, we see the results of her strategy. Two months have passed, and Om is anxious because they are late for lunch. "You know how [Ginni] hates it when we're late to eat" (234), Om says nervously. The contact module makes the receiver impose a permanent surveillance system in Om's home. Om and his family fear Ginni's anger or losing his contract, so they monitor their actions. In this instance, we witness the insidious workings of cultural hegemony; the subtle coercion, the internalized obedience, and the perpetuation of power structures.

Another poignant illustration of how cultural hegemony functions can be found in the following dialogue of Om after the agents carry away Jeet for organ transplantation. Om says to Jaya:

It's not so easy as you think – remember all those injections I had in the beginning? They were to change my body so that it could match Ginni's body perfectly. But now they've taken the wrong pair of eyes – who knows what it'll do to Ginni. And what about Jeetu's infections, all the poisons and germs he's had circulating inside him – what about them? Ginni's scared about catching your cold! What'll she catch from Jeetu? (264)

Om's compliance with the injections which might alter his physical self, once again, echoes Gramsci's idea of 'spontaneous consent'. It is also ironic that Om is not concerned about Jeetu's well-being. Instead, he is more worried about the side-effects of a wrong transplantation on their esteemed First World customer, Ginni. Om's cold-hearted response invites a reflection upon the sorry state that consumerism and commodification of human bodies can lead to.

Ethical considerations are often disregarded in a consumerism-driven global society. Indian cities like Kolkata and Mumbai are major locations for illegal trade in human organs, particularly kidneys and corneas. These trades are multimillion-dollar trades. Helen Gilbert situates such illegal acts of organ trading "within a continuum of exploitative cross-cultural relationships" which began with colonialism ("Postcolonial Plays" 215). The development of such a rapacious 'commerce' "seems to be premised on the general assumption that the bodies of the poor are worth more as spare parts than as living persons" (215). When Om addresses his brother Jeetu as "the wrong pair of eyes", the implication of Gilbert's remark becomes clear.

However, in women's playwriting discrimination and exploitation based on socio-economic divide does not go unchallenged. Women playwrights harness the power of the female narrative to confront adversities of the external world. In simpler terms, womanist dramaturgy ensures the portrayal of a woman's navigation through external challenges. Contrary to the traditional association of women writers with the exploration of internal conflicts and resolutions and men with themes of politics and religion that dominate our daily consciousness, women's

drama boldly questions this stereotype. Firstly, they deftly raise socio-economic concerns related to institutions of politics, corruption, religion and so on. Secondly, they incorporate diverse female experiences into their narratives, which eventually becomes the basis of resolving conflicts.

In the play *Harvest*, Jaya emerges as a formidable force, challenging the power of the global capital to create cultural hegemony. At the end of the play, she registers a shift in power dynamics through a demand that leaves Virgil perturbed. After claiming Jeetu's body, the American customer further proposes his wish of artificially inseminating Jaya. He even tries to lure her into agreeing with him by projecting a false image of Jeetu, with whom Jaya was in love. However, unlike Jeetu and Om, Jaya sees through the American man's schemes equating them to madness. For Virgil, who has successfully changed bodies four times, physical form is irrelevant to happiness. Jaya, on the other hand, values the authenticity of a tangible existence, emphasizing the importance of genuine human connection. Therefore, she demands physical intimacy from Virgil if he truly wants her to bear his child. Sagnika Chanda's argument that *Harvest* is "a postcolonial and posthumanist protest against the ominous future in which man has no place" (114) is realized in this demand that Jaya puts out to Virgil. That he must be physically intimate with a woman of the Third World, who lives in an environment which is too polluted for him, is beyond Virgil's imagination. He upholds the posthumanist ideology which according to Chanda is characterized by "the craving for eradication of limitations, imperfections and dispersal of the 'self' via bioscience" (114). Jaya's demand of his physical self and a threat that she will claim "the only thing... which is still [her] own: [her] death" (Padmanabhan 289) leaves little option with Virgil. Jaya asserts that by losing (her life), she wins because Virgil understands victory only in terms of living and exercising control, and in her death, she will have defeated Virgil, gaining satisfaction in knowing that he cannot control her decision or claim her body, despite her apparent weakness and helplessness. Thus, in winning by losing, Jaya registers a shift in the power dynamics and disrupts the cultural hegemony at the end of the play.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian women playwrights, particularly those writing in English, have redefined the scope and impact of their craft by deftly navigating through the complex socio-economic terrains that divide societies, not only within the urban Indian context but also globally. Plays like Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* depict the realm of global inequity with all its

discomforting realities and their impact on human relationships, compelling readers and audiences to reflect on the interconnectedness of local and global class struggles and urging a reevaluation of our responsibilities within these dynamics. As illustrated with the example of *Harvest*, contemporary women's playwriting offers a more inclusive understanding of dramatic conflict resolution by intertwining narrative conflicts and their final resolutions with women characters' experiences and subsequent decisions. Such playwriting marks a transformative shift in dramatic literature as it broadens the spectrum of stories told on stage.

Works Cited:

Chanda, Sagnika. "Posthumanism, Cyberculture & Postcolonialism in Manjula Padmanabhan's «Harvest»." *La Camera Blu, Rivista Di Studi Di Genere*, vol.11, no.12, pp. 112-129. <https://doi.org/10.6092/1827-9198/3674>

Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff. "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming." *Public Culture*, vol.12 no. 2, 2000, pp.291-343.

Gilbert, Helen. "Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*: Global technoscapes and the international trade in human body organs." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol.16 no.1, 2006, pp. 123–130. Taylor and Francis Online, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800500451070>.

Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins. *Post Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. Routledge,1996.

----- editor. *Postcolonial Plays: An Anthology*. Routledge, 2013.

Lears, T. J. Jackson. "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 3, 1985, pp. 567–93. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1860957>.

Mukherjee, Tutun, editor. *Staging Resistance: Plays by Women in Translation*. Oxford UP, 2005.

Padmanabhan, Manjula. "Harvest." *Blood and Laughter*, vol. 1, Hachette India, 2020, pp.202-291. Kindle Edition.

Navigating Global Capital's Insidious Divide: Socio-Economic Desperation and Resistance in 'Harvest'

Sengupta, Poile, and Anita Singh. "An Interview with Poile Sengupta." *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol.29, no.01 Spring 2012, pp.78-88. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23359545.