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**MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S 'HARVEST': A SCIENCE FICTION**

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**Abstract:**

*The present paper deals with the critical analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's play, 'Harvest' as a science fiction pertaining to its different characteristics, motifs and issues. As a postmodern product, the play brutally attacks on the inhuman treatment given to the underdeveloped and deprived population living in the part of the world by the super powerful countries as they look upon them as a commodity. With the advent of modernization, the First World exploits the developing and underdeveloped Third World with new scientific instruments and technology. The search for immortality remains at the core of the rich people who utilize the body organs of poor and needy. Through the science fiction mode, Manjula Padmanabhan attempts to expose the hypocrisies and exploitative nature of the rich countries. It is a modest attempt to explore the significant tenets of science fiction. It is an effort to critically analyse the play with science fiction perspective.*

**Keywords:** Science fiction, dystopia, postmodern, First World, Third World, organ donor, commodity, globalization etc.

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**Introduction**

Manjula Padmanabhan's play 'Harvest' symbolically denotes two expressions such as an agricultural process of removing the crop from the land and also the surgical operation of taking away the human organ for transplantation purposes. Written in 1996, the play is a darkly comic and unsettling tale of dissemination of globalisation and its impact on the developing countries such as India. It emerges as the organ selling market due to poverty, unemployment, over obsession for the global material pleasure propagated by the developed countries. In the play, Om Prakash, a jobless Indian, who succumbs to the social environment and decides to sell his unspecified organs to the American company, Inter Planta Services, Inc. as he has no option to solve his financial problem. It is a futuristic play set in 2010, about the sale of body parts and exploitative relations between developed and developing countries. The protagonist, Om, a breadwinner of his family is fired from employment during the recess by the advent of technology. He is the true symbol of a poverty-stricken man who belongs to a

struggling Indian family living in a cramped Bombay tenement. Padmanabhan exploits science fiction techniques to draw the surrealistic experience in the post-colonial period. At the very outset in the Author's Note, Padmanabhan declares it as a science-fiction narrative:

"The action is set a few years in the future. There are significant technical advances, but the cloths and habits of ordinary people in the 'Donor' world are no different to those of Third World citizens today. Except for the obviously exotic gadgets described in the action, household objects look reasonably familiar".

The term 'science fiction' originates from the word 'scientifiction' propagated by Hugo Gernsback, the American publisher, to encapsulate the 'Amazing stories.' He invented the term to signify the stories based on the scientific imagination. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines the Science Fiction as: 'a form of fiction that deals principally with the impact of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals.' The play 'Harvest' consists of various characteristics of science-

fiction narrative. Adam Roberts highlights some features of science-fiction as follows:

1. Spaceships, interplanetary or interstellar travel;
2. Aliens and the encounters with aliens;
3. Mechanical robots, genetic engineering, biological robots (Androids),
4. Computers, advanced technology, virtual reality;
5. Time travel;
6. Alternative history;
7. Futuristic utopias and dystopias

Om Prakash's family including his wife Jaya, his mother (Ma), and his brother Jeetu is monitored around the clock, receiving frequent video phone-type inquiries and directives through the contact module launched in his house from the supposed organ recipient, an icy young blonde named Ginni. The play as a science fiction captures the aliens like people and their encounters with the rich as Ginni reacts after her first encounter with Om's family through the contact module. For Ginni, the people from the Third World are like aliens as she reacts "I'm just switching screens here- there we go- I can see... oh my Gad, it's magical, it's wonderful! I'm really talking to India-this is really happening!"

**(Padmanabhan 2017: 30- 31).**

Om Prakash describes his first encounter with the Inter Planta Services that offers him the job after completing a mechanical and robotic process of selection. His encounter with alien looking robots and machines drives him into an exploitative system solely controlled by the corporation. He registers this horrific experience: Then – a sort of – rain burst. I wonder if I am dreaming! The water is hot, scented. Then cold. Then hot air. Then again, the water. It stings a little, this second water. Smells like some medicine. Then air again. Then we pass through another place...I don't know what is happening. Ahead of me a man screams and cries, but we are in separate little cages now, can't move. At one place, something comes to cover the eyes. There's no time to think, just do. Put your arm here, get one prick, put your arm there, get another prick- Pissshhh! Pissshhh! Sit here, stand here, take your head his side, look at a light that side. **(Padmanabhan 2017: 16-17)**

The Inter Planta Services brings apparent comfort and respectability as Om signs up to be an organ donor for an American woman named Ginni. Om's life continues as per the contract signed between them. Padmanabhan notes the changes by the advent of computers, advanced technology, virtual reality in the Om's family. The most important installation is the contact module placed at the centre of the room to facilitate communication between the receiver and the donor. As the Guard 1 appointed by corporation explains the functioning of the contact module to Om. He instructs him, "At the time of first contact, you and your Receiver will exchange personal information. Your physical data has been sent for matching." **(Padmanabhan 2017: 19).** The process of installation and activating of the device is carried out by Guard 2 who 'moves over to the CONTACT MODULE and points a remote at it. There are musical notes and clicks. The polygon stirs and lights up. A screen- saver pattern appears. The CONTACT MODULE moves, is raised and lowered a couple of times, then switched off again.' (Padmanabhan 2017: 22-23). The significant aspect of this device is that the donor and his family is kept under the constant gaze of the receiver as the module can rotate round to face each corner and can flicker to life at any moment. This is the total deprivation of Om's privacy which is the ultimate form of surveillance.

Ginni pays Om to lead a "clean" and "healthy" life so she can harvest healthy organs whenever she needs them. Pertaining to the contract, Om's family is registered and they receive the package of food. Padmanabhan narrates, 'The package is opened. Its contents are strewn about. There are brightly coloured instruction leaflets, elaborately devised containers for pills and powders and a number of small gadgets similar in size and shape to a slide- viewing device but of obscure purpose.' [25]. Om and his family are under surveillance as Ginni operates through the contact module and keep watch on them. Alien like Ginni appears via the device. Padmanabhan presents Ginni as she writes:

The CONTACT MODULE comes to life. It displays a young woman's face, beautiful in a

youthful, glamorous, First World manner. (Padmanabhan 2017: 29)

She begins to control every aspect of Om's life, from when and what he eats to whom he sees and how he uses the bathroom. In fact, the entire control of Om's family goes in the hands of Ginni. There are huge transformations in the lives of Om and his family. Padmanabhan portrays the glimpse of these changes as she narrates: Two months later. The same room, but transformed into a sleek residence with gleaming surfaces, chrome, steel and glass. The furniture is largely of the convertible kind (bed-cum-sofa, etc), in keeping with the restricted space. In addition, there are the gadgets- TV set, computer terminal, mini-gym, an air-conditioner, the works. (Padmanabhan 2017: 49)

The well-furnished room with modern equipment demonstrates impact of globalization. The poor are always hypnotized by these unseen and fantastic gadgets. Om's mother (Ma) exemplifies the victimization of the evil and exploitative world disguised in the form of material comfort. She explains the functions of so-called magical device to her daughter-in-law, Jaya:

That thing, the remote- you press some buttons and you can buy things, do things- and they bring it right to the door! (Padmanabhan 2017: 72)

In another instance, Jeetu is enamoured by the projection of Ginni as a virtual reality. He is spell bound by her modern attire and looks. It is a dream come true situation for him as he utters his excitement and infatuation:

Ginni: Ginni! That's right, Auwm- it's me you're seeing 'coz I'm beaming my video image straight into your mind! So you can see me right in front of you, all of me, for once, not just my face well? What do you think?

Jeetu: It's- you're-beautiful. Like magic. (Padmanabhan 2017: 94-95)

Om's mother, Ma is enticed by the modern gadgets as she gets an easy access to handle them for the first time in her life. It is wish fulfilment for her as she is always deprived from such material comforts. She purchases very innovative gadget that will isolate her from daily mundane realities. The agent of the company enumerates its features and consequences:

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AGENT: This is the Super Deluxe video coach model XL 5000! We are certain it will provide you our valued customer with every satisfaction. This is the nourishment panel- the hydration. This is the organic input interface-the hydration filter- the pangrometer! Here you see the Lexus Phantasticon which is programmed to receive seven hundred and fifty video channels from all over the world! There are ten modes, seventeen frequencies, three sub- strate couplers, extra-sensory feedback impulses and cross- net capturing facilities! All media access- satellite, bio-tenna, visitelly and radiogonad. Manual control panel neuro -stimulator and full- body processing capacities- all other queries will be answered on-line from within the VideoCouch self-training program. (Padmanabhan 2017: 105)

Jaya, wife of Om Prakash, is the only sensible character who knows the serious consequences of the modern gadgets as she enquires about the future of her mother-in-law's life. However, the agent, an epitome of globalization has all answers to satisfy his customers. He replies:

Agent 1: We have a full-recycling and bio-feed-in processor! Your relative will have no further need of the outside world from now 'til- she chooses to delink.

Jaya: Does she-hoe will she-

Agent 1: Everything is now in the customer's operation, Ma'am- the unit is fully self-sufficient-

Jaya: Won't I have to switch it on or off? No food? No water? (Padmanabhan 2017: 107)

The InterPlanta Services performs surgery on Jeetu's body and Virgil utilizes his body organs. Jeetu dies during the surgery but he is projected alive as a virtual reality through the contact module. Padmanabhan depicts the scene:

Behind Jaya's back, the CONTACT MODULE grows bright, sinks to floor level, making clicking, whirring sounds. When it rises again, a projection appears underneath. A figure is revealed, first its feet, then its bare legs...it is Jeetu. There is no longer any visor across his eyes, he looks completely healed. But his expression is unfamiliar and his haircut, the skinny clothes he wears, the way he holds himself-all of these suggest a transformation that

goes beyond mere well-being. (**Padmanabhan 2017: 111**)

Virgil, an American buyer of Om's body organs, appears as Ginni. He further clarifies his virtual existence to Jaya, the only survivor:

Virgil: Nothing. Nobody. A computer-animated wet-dream- I'll show you, just a minute. (a faint buzz, then the voice that issues from the MODULE is in Ginni's cloying tones) Hello Zhaya! Recognize me now? This is what I sound like when my voice is a few tones higher. (**Padmanabhan 2017: 113**)

The play concludes with Jaya's decision. She recognizes the selfishness of Virgil as she denies his proposal of pregnancy and she comes out as a strong woman of India who never succumbs before the evils in society. She emerges as a woman of confidence and self-reliant nature as she declares to Virgil:

"You'll only share your electronic dreams with me, your "virtual" touch, your plastic shadows-no! If the only clothes I can afford are these rags of pride, then I'll wear them with my head held high-" (**Padmanabhan 2017: 121**)

In this way, Manjula Padmanabhan's 'Harvest' presents a futuristic condition of Third World people in the form of dystopia, a form of science fiction as it manifests different forms of evils and corruption. It is manifestation of the postmodern society controlled by First World through the use of science and technology.

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