

Swimming Against Moral Currents: Gasping for Survival in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) depicts despoiled and despondent characters whose change of fortunes compel them to careen between two conflicting cultures and squash their revered moral etiquettes as their vulnerable bodies are prey on and their lifestyles are distorted with impunity. Although the audience/readers may wriggle on Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, circumstances drive her characters to swim against moral currents to survive in a world hanging on a string of economic collapse. Conscious of the dent their choices would put on their morality, these characters still surrender their rights to their own bodies and their pristine values to Ginni, a metaphor for western greed and exploitation. Ginni, via InterPlanta Services, tiptoes into the lives of impoverished Indian characters with promises of alleviating their poverty-stricken conditions, but quickly becomes a dour, barking orders to them with sternness, and leaving them battered and empty. Bruised by active resistance to western encroachment into their lives, Jaya defies the patriarchal system, even as her family members egg on her husband to give away everything for basic western needs.

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Manjula Padmanabhan, an Indian playwright, journalist, and comic strip artist in her award-winning screenplay, *Harvest* (1997), presents characters trampling on their revered moral values as their vulnerable bodies are prey on and their lifestyles altered with impunity. Although the audience/readers may squirm on Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, circumstances drive their characters to swim against moral currents to survive in a world fenced on all sides by avid hardship. Aware that their actions are anathema to prudish moral climate and to an Indian culture in which the attorney general argued in the Supreme Court that "the concept of absolute right over one's body was a myth..." (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/citizens-dont-have-absolute-right-over-their-bodies-government/articleshow/58486260.cms>), these characters seemingly and audaciously give up their rights to their own bodies and to their pristine values. They sporadically vacillate between half-baked morality and utter repudiation of putative scruples in their societies as they grapple in the tide of survival or staying afloat.

Padmanabhan's *Harvest* depicts a poverty-stricken, dependent, and desperate four-member Indian family wealthy Westerners prey on by harvesting or say yanking their organs/body parts after providing them ordinary "gifts". To Bowden (2013), characters in this play are victims of organs trafficking, which "is the recruitment,

transport, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of force, fraud, coercion, abduction, positions of vulnerability and exploitation, with the purpose being the removal of their organ(s) for transplantation” (pp. 451-495). In *Harvest*, Om Prakash, the young breadwinner/head of the Prakash family, is compelled by the loss of his job as clerk to sacrifice his wellbeing and that of his family for ordinary Western-world enticements. Ginni, a sweet-talker, deceptive, conniving, and flashy American lady, tricks Om to agree to trade his unspecified organs to intrusive Western buyers/usurpers for basic needs, but his attempt to escape from poverty alters his identity, creates a conflict-ridden relationship in his family and costs him the abandonment of his neighbors. To Jeevitha and Subramanian (2018), in their article, “Familial Bonding in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest*” in *International Journal of Advanced Research (IJAR)*, Om the central character of the play in quest of a better living condition unknowingly, puts the whole family and familial relationship at stake. Overpowered by the glittering world of consumer culture, he endlessly remains in materialistic lifestyle that eludes him till the end” (pp. 1383-1386). It should, nevertheless, be noted that Om’s interest from the onset is not predicated on a yearning for luxury; he is in search of a job for survival and not for a luxurious lifestyle.

While Padmanabhan’s Om and some family members, such as Ma and Jeetu happily welcome the deal, it must be noticed that beneath this seemingly plush and debonair, brews dissent and frustration as characters’ new way of life becomes a mirage, thus exposing the vacuous nature of Western capitalism and lifestyle. The deliberate giving away of body parts is tantamount to surrendering one’s identity and culture in a permanent manner to Ginni, a metaphor for capitalism and foreign encroachment in this futuristic play. No doubt,

Ginni’s dictates quickly come to govern the minutiae of the Indians’ lives, specifying what and when they can eat, how they should conduct their personal hygiene and, to some extent, how they can relate to each other. This deterritorialized power, exercised at a distance yet all-invasive in its effects, precipitates the breakdown of the family as a social unit as Om, his mother, his wife Jaya, and his brother Jeetu (Jaya’s secret lover) each compromise their humanity and/or betray their kin in their hollow quests for affluence. (Gilbert, 2006, pp. 123-130)

This instant usurpation of the Prakash family suggests a stunning turn as that the play begins with the Prakash family in harmony and at the helm of their Indian culture. Although Jaya who is only 19-year-old looks older, is thin and haggard, and Ma is stooped, scrawny, crabby and wears a threadbare shirt and looks older than the 19 years old, they still uphold their culture and bear their identities, and do so at the backdrop of 40 families sharing a single bathroom.

To showcase her venerable culture, Jaya has a red dot on her forehead. The red dot, referred to as a *bindi* across India, emanates from the Hindu tradition, which dates back to the third and fourth centuries. Traditionally, women wear such dots to indicate that they are married and for religious purposes. To point to the sense of their common, recognizable identity, all the characters in *Harvest* walk around their home without shoes, welcome their neighbors without perceiving them as beasts of burden, and, as previously mentioned, share the same bathroom with 40 different families without indignation. Glued to abject poverty and hardship, the Prakash family seems happy, kind, tolerant, united, and culturally rooted. The world of members of this family, nevertheless, crashes when Om loses his job and InterPlanta Company seizes on this vulnerability to offer him a “job” as an organ donor. “InterPlanta Services will maintain Om and his immediate family in a consumerist lifestyle in exchange for Om living as a spare-parts inventory for a recipient half a world away” (Halpin, 2014, pp. 213-223). Ginni, the distant ambassador of Western interests uses flush toilets, kitchen appliances, television, running water, and contact module to subjugate the Prakash family. “As though the enforced changes were gateway drugs to a radical lifestyle transformation, Om’s family has largely eliminated

their contact with their neighbours, replacing it with in-home entertainments” (Halpin, 2014, pp. 213-223).

In his piece “Identifying Identity”, Philip Gleason (1995) held that “the word identity was ideally adapted to talking about the relationship of the individual to society” (p. 194). In this light, we note that the Prakash Indian family in *Harvest* experiences an unusual and an incessant shift in relation to their standing in its Indian community. While some of the characters are glued to Western technology, such as a 750-channel television, which Ma spends time flipping through channels, others question their worth when faced with the reality of the “job” Om has taken on. Jaya, Om’s wife and a metaphor for an opinionated modern woman, resistance, and hope in the play, laments how Om’s decision to donate or say sell his organs to some unknown white lady from the West has radically altered his life, and by extension, their marital relationship: “He’s sold his rights to his organs! His skin. His eyes. His arse. Sold them!” (Padmanabhan, 1997, p. 223). It is a daunting task for Jaya to concede that her husband’s body was worth so little and that someone could buy it piece by piece under the watchful eyes of her husband and mother (Ma). Through humiliating and exploitative practices of this nature, the West “imposed and maintained its codes in its colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, p. 221). As the play intimates, the West uses its wealth and technological advantage as baits to lure and capture the most vulnerable in third-world countries.

In his discussion about America, Gleason (1995) insisted that the turmoil of the 1960s was “a challenge to every individual to decide where he or she stood with respect to the traditional values, beliefs, and institutions that were being called into question” (p. 195). In the same vein, each character in *Harvest*, a metaphor for the most Westernized Indian town, Mumbai (where the play is set), and contemporary India at large, must decide if the loss of dignity and values is comparable to the basic living accommodations obtained from such fickle and exploitative cross-cultural relationships. Through InterPlanta Services, characters lose the core of their being to materialism, a hurricane which tears apart a vibrant culture in the economic headquarter of India, which is quickly losing its cultural heritage to Western endearments and encroachment. Reduced to its essence and put as a whole, capitalism which would be described in traditional culture as a materialistic and technological hurricane sweeps through Mumbai, India, leaving on its tracts pieces of a fused and a confused culture and identity. In Chopra Anuj’s (2008) “Harvesting Kidneys from the Poor for Rich Patients”, he describes the bitter experience of an Indian organ seller:

Tears well up in Guna Ponraj’s rheumy eyes as he stares at the hideous scar running down his side. A year ago, he consented to a practice he assumed would be the swiftest way to escape his mounting debts: swapping a kidney for cash.... An organ procurer promised Ponraj, 38, an auto-rickshaw driver with a fourth-grade education, the equivalent of \$2,500 for one of his kidneys. “Humans don’t need two kidneys, I was made to believe,” he says, now regretting his decision. “I can sell my extra kidney and become rich, I thought.” But he was swindled and received only half the amount promised. And since the operation, Ponraj often misses work because of excruciating pain around his hip, pushing him more deeply into debt. (pp. 33-34)

Jaya quickly notices the sudden collapse of their culture and identity in the play, and confronts Om whom Ma defends:

JAYA: You said it wouldn’t affect us—but see what it’s done already!

OM: So tell me—what? IN exchange for your
Old kitchen you have a new modern one—

JAYA: You call this food? This goat-shit? She
Indicates the pellets they have been eating.)

MA: It’s better than what you make—

JAYA: And call me your sister—what’s
That? If I’m your sister, what does that
Make you? Sister, huh! My forehead burns
When I say that word “sister”!
MA: Shoo! Are you a street woman? To speak
In such a voice?
OM: You think I did it lightly. But at the cost
of calling you my sister ... we’ll be rich!
Very rich! Insanely rich! But you’d rather
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 our neighbors’ rhythm
Farting! Dancing to the tune
of the melodious traffic! And starving. Yes, you’d
prefer this to being called my sister on a
stupid slip of paper no-one we know will
ever see! (Padmanabhan, 1997, p. 223)

These exchanges highlight cracks in the family and the struggle between Indian cultural values and those of the West. Ma’s split personality and her new hybrid culture are evident, as she is concerned about Jaya’s tone. To her, Jaya’s high pitch while talking to her husband is not congruent with their cultural values, yet she favors Western materialism over the serenity and simple living that has just been traded by her favorite son, Om. Like Ma, Om’s focus is on wealth, even when his identity, family, and culture are in erosion. Conversely, Jaya dreads the loss of her dignity and identity as she challenges Virgil toward the end of the play: “Huh, my life? It’s not really mine anymore. You’ve shown me that. The only thing I have which is still my own is my death. My death and my pride” (p. 248). While discussing the representation of indigenous people, particularly Aboriginal peoples, in his article “The Myth of Authenticity”, Gareth Griffiths (1995) touched on “the displacement of their peoples in policy assimilation”, and one can safely assert that such displacement is evident in the Prakash family once they instantly start assimilating Western lifestyle by altering their eating habits, lifestyle, and above all their belief and value system. At a moment’s notice, Ginni pushes members of the Prakash family to unconsciously and incessantly tear their lives and culture in all directions.

This cultural transformation/alteration does not go without resistance. Jaya is the lone character who actively resists capitalism and exploitation in the play. She risks her life in a bid to save an Indian heritage, which is prone to utter collapse. Threatening to kill herself, she yells to Virgil, “For the first time in my life and maybe the last time in my life, I’m going to enjoy myself, all by myself” (p. 250). Jaya, at this point, has clarity on what she needs to do in order to sustain and keep her identity, even if it means losing her life at a young age of 19 years. She will not and does not embrace what her husband, brother-in-law, and mother in-law have embraced, which is forced upon them for a fatuous promise of a better life.

In their short essay “Place”, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1995) discussed place and displacement as “crucial features” of post-colonial discourse and this is particularly poignant in the case of *Harvest* (p. 345). As can be expected of such a feature, place in

post-colonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. It is characterized first by a sense of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies, or the more widespread sense of displacement from the imported language, of a gap between the “experienced” environment and descriptions the language provides, and second,

by a sense of the immense investment of culture in the construction of place. (p. 345)

The Prakash family loses control over its own home, culture, and way of life, and are owned and constantly watched via a contact module or say surveillance camera installed in their home without their consent or understanding that their private lives will be watched and controlled from across the world. Placing the contact module at the center of their one-bed-room apartment shows the utter takeover of their lives. Ginni suddenly moves from nowhere to the margin at first and at last to the center of their lives, thus the entire family is under her full manipulation and control.

In “Colonialism and the Desiring Machine”, Robert J. C. Young (1994) referred to the “Empire” as a machine, one that even in resistance works effectively; this is more than likely due to the fact that if the machine is working properly, it will prompt resistance. But what is most relevant is that when considering *Harvest*, the machine is in full effect via InterPlanta and desire is one of the deciding factors as to how effective the machine will be. At some degree, every character had a desire that at first seemed worth the trade-off, but in the end, it was only Ma and Jeetu who could not escape their desiring, and so the imperialistic machine mauls down their identity and culture, even for Ma whose roots in her culture are supposed to be deep and warrant a full-force defense of her culture, which is hanging on a thread of utter collapse. The effectiveness of the machine, however, relies on the perception and the reality that there are no other options; the exploitation can only be put into place where there is the “other” to take advantage of. These sorts of conditions run rampant in *Harvest*:

OM: Wating—not wanting—what meaning
Do these words have? Was it my choice that
I signed up for this program?

JAYA: Who forced you? You went of your
own accord!

OM: I went because I lost my job in the
Company...

JAYA: You’re wrong, there are choices—
There must be choices. (Padmanabhan, 1997, p. 238)

In fact, “occult economies are thus riddled with antinomies: they prey on vulnerable populations, yet they involve only willing participants; they place lives at risk, yet they also save lives” (Shital, 2013, pp. 38-60). To point the lies, selfishness, and moral decadence that lace Western culture in, we learn from the play as follows:

Having seized upon Jeetu rather than Om, InterPlanta briefly returns Jeetu to the family, wearing virtual reality goggles to replace his transplanted eyes. (This is the play’s only staged representation of bodily transplantation not mediated by the Contact Module.) The appearance of Ginni, her whole body, not just the face previously shown in the Contact Module transmitted straight to [Jeetu’s] mind is all it takes to produce Jeetu’s assent to trade the rest of his body for a virtual life (p. 240).

After all, “what Virgil wanted was a whole, new, young, male body so that he can use its sperm to get himself children” (Halpin, 2014, pp. 213-223) at very minimal cost and with no inconveniences.

One would safely conclude Manjula Padmanabhan depicts Indians at the crossroad, where they face the grim choice of choosing between illusive Western wealth and their venerable culture and identity. Capitalistic and imperial encroachments lead to cultural clash and disintegration of a firmly rooted lifestyle in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest*, in which prosperous and exploitative Westerners prey on the economically depressed

Indians. Faced with acute poverty and materialism, which is void of cultural dignity, Padmanabhan's Jaya, a metaphor for resistance, modern woman, and hope, resists all forms of exploitation that targets the body parts of poor Indians. She spurns Virgil's argument, which insists, "we secured paradise—at the cost of birds and flowers, bees and snakes.... We support the poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves" (p. 246). As Jaya threatens to take her own life over Virgil's utopia and declares that she would be a winner if she were to die in the course of defending her dying culture, she gropes against all odds for a lost culture and identity at the crossroad manned by a strong imperial agenda that feeds on acute greed and compromising members of her own family, who have auctioned the values for which they have from time immemorial held fast.

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