

Human Commodification in Dystopian India: Connecting Tribal Displacement with the Body-Market in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Abstract

This paper examines the unity between commodification of human beings, bio capital, and exploitation of the resources, placing the *Harvest* of Manjula Padmanabhan in socio-political context of the tribal displacement in the present-day India. The dystopian body-market of the play whereby financially disadvantaged people sell their organs and physical services to the wealthy Western beneficiaries is interpreted as the allegorical expansion of the materiality of how the marginalized tribal communities are dispossessed of land, labour and possession of their bodies in the pretext of development and globalization. The paper uses postcolonial, feminist and biopolitical theories that Padmanabhan futuristic narrative exaggerates the power imbalances that exist in the current India neoliberal development plan in which the land is commodified as are human bodies being sold in the bloc markets.

The analysis also shows how *Harvest* reveals the turn of body to be a venue of transaction, surveillance, and discipline, which reflects the lived experiences of displaced tribal populations whose daily experiences are mediated by forced migration, extractive industries and collusion between the states and corporations. The donor receiver machine of the play is a metaphor of the hierarchical order wherein the population of the tribal ends up deprived of control over the physical space and bodily bodies to serve as fungible commodities of a bigger economic engine. Showing the correlations of the dystopian commodification of body integrity with the manifestations in the real world, where people are deprived of their human dignity due to the development paradigm that places global capital in the first place, the paper shows the resonance between the moral and ethical collapse that Padmanabhan criticizes the development paradigm in its entirety.

The paper posits that *Harvest* is not merely the movie that questions the commodification of human body, but it also prefigures the more general socio-political processes of turning the subjugated communities into exploitable assets. In the paper, his work by Padmanabhan is staged as a strong culture text, which cautions the situationalization of the commodification of bodies and territories in modern day developmental arena in India.

Keywords: tribal displacement; biopolitics; neoliberalism; body-market; postcolonial studies; exploitation; surveillance; development politics.

Introduction

History and dynamics of development have predetermined the modern India paradigm where inequalities have existed between the state, capital, and the marginalized segments. Simultaneously, literature, in particular, dystopian drama, tends to be revealing these inequalities by prolonging the violence inherent in modernization processes. An excellent illustration of this essential role of literature is *Harvest* (1997), by Manjula Padmanabhan, the 1997 winner of the Onassis Award, in which bodies of urban poor are being literally and figuratively harvested to be seen as food to the rest of the world. It takes place in a Mumbai slum where Om Prakash gets into an agreement with the multinational company InterPlanta Services Inc. to sell the right of his body organs to a rich Western recipient. In its dark vision of the body as commodity and life as capital, this play not only criticizes the worldwide organ trade but also a wider political logic namely, the downgrade of vulnerable populations to expendable ones. This rationality, I would say, is quite similar to the current displacement of Adivasis (tribal communities) in India, where the state, together with corporations, takes the land, forest, and body labour. At last, in terms of the biopolitics (Foucault) and the productions of the bare life (Agamben), *Harvest* is an effective allegory of forces that deroot, control and commodify tribal lives in modern India.

Padmanabhan herself is one of the artists who are extremely interested in the points of collision between technology, development, and human vulnerability. *Harvest* is a product of the fears of the 1990s economic liberalization, the growing forces of the international corporations, and the growing penetration of India into global markets. The social order described in the play echoes the contemporary debates: the organ trading - business, the commodification of female reproductive labour, the hope and threat of technological surveillance, and the injustice of world capitalism. The world of the play is not an alien, but futuristic. It is a deformation of what is today India where the poor live by tenuous deals with the powers that be. Thus, with such a move, *Harvest* provides a dramaturgical language of thought regarding the ways of how the lives of the marginalized groups, such as displaced tribal communities, are influenced by the structures of treating bodies and land as extractable assets.

Literature Review

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) has received scholarly acclaim because of its portrayal of issues such as globalization, technological hegemony, organ trading, and the imbalanced relation between the Global North and the Global South. The predominant interpretation of the play is dystopian in nature and represents the play as a critique of the neoliberal capitalism where the economically underprivileged bodies become commodities through the global exchange process. The futuristic setting of the act of organ harvesting in the play reveals the ethical ramifications of the commodification of the human body in a globalized world.

One of the major interpretations of *Harvest* has been provided by Helen Gilbert, who says that the drama is an analysis of the power imbalance generated by the capitalist system through the idea of body-market. As stated by Gilbert, the advancement of technology seen in the drama does not work as a means of development; instead, it becomes the way in which rich countries can dominate economically weak groups of people. The donor-receiver relation in the play represents the imbalance between the developed and developing countries (Gilbert 2003).

In a similar vein, Shital Pravinchandra views *Harvest* as a strong example of the commodification of Third World bodies in the capitalist world system. As per Pravinchandra, Padmanabhan sees the bodies of the poor people as commodities that have biological worth and no moral worth at all. It is evident from the play that through globalization, poverty becomes an economic resource and poor people become biological resources that sustain the lives of the rich.

Biopolitical theory provides additional layers of critique of the text through its conceptual apparatus. Biopower is an important notion introduced by Michel Foucault, which denotes the way in which modern institutional structures exercise control over bodies, health, and processes of life in order to regulate and discipline populations. Applying Foucauldian approach to the analysis of the text, researchers have claimed that *InterPlanta* serves as a biopolitical agency, controlling not only the health of the donors, but also their daily behavior and private lives (Foucault 1990).

The notion of bare life introduced by Giorgio Agamben has also been used to describe the state of the donor figures. According to Agamben, sovereign power turns particular groups into pure biological existence, depriving them of political subjectivity and protection through law. In this respect, the donors in the novel are gradually becoming less autonomous as they exist only in terms of the biological utility of their organs. The humanity of the characters is overshadowed by their usefulness in the organ economy of the world (Agamben 1998).

The feminist analysis can be considered another useful way to view the drama, which was elaborated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her consideration of the subaltern, Spivak shows how oppressed people in general and women in particular face different oppressions within patriarchy and empire. The case of Jaya in *Harvest* represents this situation where the body and agency of a woman are subjects not only of the patriarchal but also of the corporate dominance. Thus, the rebellion of Jaya in the end of the drama can be viewed as her exercise of agency (Spivak 1988).

Aside from literature review, several scholarly works have looked into the issue of development displacement in relation to tribal people in India. According to Walter Fernandes, development projects, such as mining projects, dams, and industries, have been responsible for the displacement of the Adivasi communities

more so than other social groups post-independence in India without providing any form of resettlement and rehabilitation or upholding their rights (Fernandes 2005). Similarly, Utsa Patnaik says that the legal process of land acquisition justifies the displacement while hiding the existing inequalities under the guise of development (Patnaik 2003).

Although these are important contributions to the understanding of *Harvest*, what has received relatively less attention is the analysis of this play in relation to the contemporary experience of tribal displacement and dispossession caused by development in India. It is only partially addressed how the commodification of the body in the dystopia created by Padmanabhan can be equated with the commodification of indigenous land, labour, and the right to self-determination. This paper seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the possibility of interpreting the play as not only the allegory of organ trafficking but also as the allegory of development-induced dispossession.

Methodology

For this research, I have used the qualitative textual approach, which is necessary for the analysis of the socio-political conditions of tribal dispossession in Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest*. In particular, the analysis of this literature work will be based mainly on the method of close reading that allows the researcher to analyze the plot, characters, motifs, themes and other aspects of the work. Theoretical concepts which will underlie this research will include postcolonialism, biopolitics, and feminism. The major contributions in these fields made by Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak will be taken into account during the research. The above-mentioned concepts allow analyzing the problems related to the topics such as power, body, marginalization, exploitation, and silencing of the subalterns in the work under consideration. Apart from the literary work itself, secondary sources will also be used in the research that will include articles and studies on development induced displacement, globalization, neoliberal economic policies, and dispossession of the indigenous communities.

Analysis

Upon close reading of *Harvest*, one can understand that the commodification of the body in the play is developed in the same way as with tribal displacement: commodity exploitation with the help of contracts, monitoring, deprivation of control, dehumanization, resource appropriation, and functionalization of human beings. The main figure, Om Prakash, puts his physical rights into the hands of a person, not due to the desire but due to the need. This is how he ends up saying that they will never starve again and tries to justify the contract to his wife, Jaya (Padmanabhan 14). The currency of bodily autonomy is placed on survival. This sale resembles the plight of Adivasi people, who are forced to move not because of their will but because of the forceful developmental projects. The state buys their land to mine it or build dams or industrial corridors but tends to offer re-development and prosperity but bring about vulnerability and dispossession. Walter Fernandes notes that the displacement of people in India caused by development has impacted over sixty million individuals since independence with the Adivasis making a disproportionately large number of those displaced (Fernandes 124). Similar to Om, such communities are forced to engage in exploitative deals that are disguised as development.

Padmanabhan dramatizes the loss of individual control with the aid of the devices of technology and surveillance. The videophone with which the Receiver is able to communicate with the family of Om is symbolized as the perpetual spy. Ginni is a spokesperson representing the Receiver, who traces his/her movement, teaches them how to eat, how to wash, and how to behave, and imposes a total authority. We tell you to eat such as you eat. We shall tell you how to live; how to live you will live, she says (Padmanabhan 22). Here is the biopolitical power at its purest. Michel Foucault suggests that biopolitics refers to the control of populations by managing bodies, health and processes of life (Foucault 143). This is precisely what happens in *Harvest*: in this case, InterPlanta controls not just the physical, but also the emotional life of the donors. The Donor family has to live such a way of their life that guarantees future bodily contentment to the Receiver thus becoming living vessels of value.

On the same note, state mechanisms allow the tribal communities to undergo the processes of surveillance, regulation, and control. An example of such situation is the bastar region of Chhattisgarh where

Adivasis are governed under militarized states under the guise of fighting insurgency, movement, livelihood patterns and even food practices are controlled by paramilitary forces. Reports by NGOs and scholars explain how such communities are being spied on and punished as one of the efforts the state is making to safeguard its corporate interests in mining-infested territories. This surveillance resembles the overwhelming role of Ginni in the play. Technology, law and military power find an intersection in both settings, resulting in the formation of systems in which the bodies of subaltern are rutable, and disposable.

The other strong parallel is a contractual basis of exploitation. In *Harvest*, the InterPlanta agreement is represented as a legally binding, and advantageous contract, however, it can be described as an administrative and exploitative one. The signing of it is under the pressure of economic necessity, by Om without knowing the consequences. Om quashes Jaya when she complains, suggesting that they have no options as the consequence of poverty. On the same note, tribal displacement can frequently take place via legal methods as land acquisition legislation, Environmental clearances and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with firms. These papers articulate displacement as a legitimate and what needed to be done to advance the country. Nevertheless, these legal systems conceal violence as done by Utsa Patnaik that poses dispossession as formal consent (Patnaik 127). In fiction and reality, the law is a tool which justifies something exploitative instead of avoiding it.

Padmanabhan drives the metaphor of body-market to its extreme depth by revealing how bodies can replace each other. His body is to be extracted when Jeetu, the brother of Om, unintentionally takes the place of the latter as a donor. His disappearance near the end gives the impression that Jeetu has been harvested and his body torn to pieces to keep the life of the Receiver. At last, he is gone, bit by bit, cries Jaya (Padmanabhan 80). The brutal nature of such removal is analogous to the reality of Adivasis who are slowly deprived of their forests, land, rivers, and source of livelihood. Like in the case of Jeetu, the same thing happens to the tribal land wherein mining firms, hydroelectricity and industrial corridors consume the land. The gradual destruction of tribal communities, i.e. the erasure of culture, displacing urban migration, losing land is similar to the dismantling of the body represented in the play. The two contexts are also related to the theme of gendered exploitation. Both the Receiver and her husband whenever subject Jaya to objectification. Her voice gets dismissed, her agency undermined and her body is targeted via her, to be commodified in a subtle way. The male gaze of the Receiver is revealed more at the end, meanwhile, being a hint at the sexual exploitation. Several scholars such as Spivak have been arguing since way back that women who are marginalized are experiencing a dual colonization that is; oppression by the patriarchy and the structures of the imperialist power (Spivak 299). The people most vulnerable during displacement are the tribal women, especially, with tribal women being victims of sexual violence within the conflict areas, loss of livelihood and loss of social protection. The act of Jaya personified in this way by Padmanabhan is therefore representative of the extensive violence of women in hierarchy structures.

The psychological effect of commodification is also one of the focal points of the criticism made by Padmanabhan. Om initially becomes devalued; Jeetu a biological resource; and Ma the mother, is completely devoid of intellectual transportation, so immersed in the material comforts offered by InterPlanta, that she cannot tell the difference between sincere concern and corporate and business manipulation. It is a psychological distortion in that Giorgio Agamben regards this as the creation of the so-called bare life- humans reduced to merely being biological without political agency (Agamben 45). Similar psychological fragmentation can often happen to displaced groups of the tribe, the loss of identity, disorientation, and alienation to mother earth. Land is not just an economic capital of Adivasis it is the cultural, spiritual and communal one. The loss of it causes the disruption of existence like the one that Om and her family experienced due to the loss of bodily autonomy.

Padmanabhan also uncovers the stratification of the world capitalism. The figure of the Receiver is still remote, invisible, omnipotent. He is the devouring West: economically dominant, culturally dominant, and technologically dominant. The family of Om is a symbol of the exploited Third World: voiceless, controlled and forced to work. Such opponents as Pravinchandra believe that *Harvest* exaggerates the processes of commodifying the third-world body in the conditions of global capitalism (Pravinchandra 74). In the meantime, researchers such as Helen Gilbert point out that this play criticizes interdependent global locales whereby bodies, labour and resources are distributed unevenly (Gilbert 8). This duality receiver/donor, West/non-West, also finds its reflection

in tribal displacement literature, where globally dominant multinational corporations aided by the government steal resources of indigenous lands to sell them on global markets. In case of bauxite in Odisha, iron ore in Chhattisgarh or forests in Jharkhand, those who gain are external to the communities who have to suffer the cost.

This is especially the case with the end of *Harvest*. Jaya does not give in to further exploitation but rather does not give in to the last attempt of religious body possession by the Receiver. She claims agency though she is isolated, traumatized and oppressed. Her last action is not a complete conquest, a complete submission either. It represents the non-commodification of one. This opposition echoes Adivasi rebellions all over India - Dongria Kondhs rebelling in Niyamgiri, anti-Sardar Sarovar Project movements, and the multiple rebellions recorded by activists and academics. These societies do not believe that growth can be established at the expense of the weak. Their protest, similar to that of Jaya, represents rejection: rejection of becoming bare life, rejection of being exploited by the capitalist and state machinery.

Combined, *Harvest* is not a play about organ trade. It is turned into a criticism of the political and economic organizations according to which the bodies and the lands are considered to be the market commodities. The similarity between the family that Om used to live in and displaced tribal communities is profound. They both are victims of systemic inequalities, politics of coercive development, surveillance, loss of autonomy and reducing life into economic value. They both suffer violence in the guise of progress. The dystopianism of Padmanabhan therefore makes a direct address to the modern socio-political realities of India shedding light on the moral pandemonium caught up in the rhetoric of development.

Finally, *Harvest* is a strong cultural text that reveals the strong nexus between technology and global capitalism and the susceptibility of human beings. Its representation of commodification of the body is deeply familiar with the experiences of the displaced Indian tribes. The play shows that in biopolitical and imperialist organized exploitation, the bodies and lands are now commodities and replaceable commodities in the context of neoliberal rule. Comparing the fictional body-market and the actual displacement in real-life, the study comes up with the idea that the dystopia offered by Padmanabhan is based on the political present.

In conclusion, *Harvest* also challenges the readers with some uncomfortable truths: that the cost of development is frequently the life of the marginalized, that the work of capitalism is based on the dispensability of the rightful, and that there is still a possibility of fighting. The last thing that Jayacharya does is the reminder of the present struggles of the Adivasi communities about the fact that the issue of commodification can be criticizable and the human dignity can at least be restored.

Conclusion

This research is an example of how Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* not only reveals the horror of organ trafficking but also uncovers the more comprehensive framework of neoliberal capitalism where human bodies and disadvantaged peoples become commodities. By establishing the link between the dystopian body market described in the play and the reality of tribal displacement in India, the research points out how development, surveillance, and corporate interests dehumanize those groups that have been made vulnerable and treat them as exploitable resources. Using the lens of postcolonial, biopolitical, and feminist approaches, *Harvest* turns into an important allegory of dispossession and struggle.

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