



## ETHICS AND EXPLOITATION: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF ORGAN DONATION IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *HARVEST*

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### ABSTRACT:

In an age defined by rapid biomedical advancements and stark global inequalities, Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian play *Harvest* (1997) offers a searing critique of organ donation when it intersects with poverty, globalization, and bioethics. By imagining a future in which corporations contract with impoverished individuals to harvest their organs, Padmanabhan lays bare the moral compromises and systemic exploitation that underpin a commodified human body. This paper unpacks the ethical ambiguities in *Harvest* through close textual analysis, examining how economic desperation and postcolonial power imbalances render the poor vulnerable to dehumanizing practices masquerading as medical progress. Drawing on feminist theory and postcolonial scholarship, the study interrogates the play's depiction of bodily autonomy, gendered exploitation, and virtual surveillance, ultimately challenging readers to confront the human costs of an unregulated global organ trade.

### KEYWORDS:

**ORGAN COMMODIFICATION, BIOETHICS, EXPLOITATION, GLOBAL INEQUALITY, BODILY, AUTONOMY, DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE.**

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### INTRODUCTION

Organ transplantation has emerged as one of modern medicine's most celebrated achievements, offering life-saving interventions to patients with end-stage organ failure. Yet beneath these technological triumphs lurk troubling ethical questions: when poverty compels individuals to "donate" their organs for financial gain, does genuine consent still exist? Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* dramatizes these dilemmas by situating her characters in a near-future India where an international corporation—Inter Planta Services—contracts with desperate families to harvest their organs for wealthy Western clients. Padmanabhan's portrayal of the Prakash family's entanglement with this corporate enterprise exposes how global inequality transforms altruistic medical procedures into exploitative transactions. In foregrounding the tensions between bodily autonomy and economic coercion, *Harvest* forces us to ask: whose lives are we really saving, and at what human cost?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on *Harvest* emphasizes its dystopian vision of biocapitalism and its incisive commentary on postcolonial exploitation. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Lawrence Cohen's investigations of real-world organ trafficking resonate deeply with Padmanabhan's fictional world, illustrating how impoverished communities become unwitting sources of biological capital for global healthcare markets. Feminist critics such as Anne Balsamo and Judith Butler provide theoretical tools for analyzing how *Harvest*

portrays gendered dimensions of bodily commodification, revealing the ways in which technological mediation reinforces rather than dissolves traditional power hierarchies. Meanwhile, postcolonial readings by Sujatha Moni and others highlight the play's critique of neo-colonial dynamics, where first-world entities extract bodily resources from the third world under the guise of medical necessity. Together, these scholarly perspectives establish a framework for understanding *Harvest* not only as a work of speculative fiction but also as a potent lens on contemporary bioethical debates.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on feminist and postcolonial theories to interrogate the intersection of gender, technology, and exploitation in *Harvest*. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity illuminates how virtual agents like Virgil and Ginni manipulate family members' perceptions of gender roles to better control their bodies. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" underscores the socially constructed nature of gendered expectations that Padmanabhan exposes. Postcolonial theorists such as Franz Fanon and Gayatri Spivak provide insight into how global power imbalances enable the commodification of third-world bodies by first-world corporations. By integrating these frameworks, the analysis will trace how *Harvest* portrays bodily autonomy as contingent upon—and compromised by—systemic inequalities perpetuated through both

physical and virtual technologies.

## ANALYSIS

### ECONOMIC COERCION AND BODILY COMMODIFICATION

From the moment InterPlanta Services offers the Prakash family a lifeline, economic desperation dictates every decision. Om Prakash, the patriarch, consents to sell his organs to pay for his nephew Jeetu's medical care, believing that partial compensation will secure the family's survival. Yet each organ removal further erodes Om's autonomy, transforming his body into a series of spare parts for anonymous clients. Padmanabhan's staging of the living room as a corporate negotiation table underscores how home becomes subsumed by market logic, where familial bonds are weighed against monetary value. This dystopian scenario reflects real-world organ markets, where the poorest populations often resort to selling organs out of necessity rather than choice.

### VIRTUAL SURVEILLANCE AND GENDERED CONTROL

Padmanabhan deepens this critique through the characters of Virgil and Ginni—virtual agents who communicate with the Prakash family through the Contact Module, a globe-shaped screen. Virgil, appearing first as a disembodied voice, gradually takes on a male form, invoking patriarchal authority to dictate the family's compliance: "We look for young men's bodies to live in and young women's bodies in which to sow their children" (Padmanabhan 96). Ginni, an animated female figure, embodies a performative femininity designed to manipulate Jaya and her sons. Drawing on Butler's theory of gender performativity, these virtual figures demonstrate how digital technologies can reinscribe oppressive gender norms. Their surveillance extends beyond physical proximity, invading the Prakash home and mind, illustrating how bio-surveillance perpetuates both gendered and colonial power structures.

### RESISTANCE AND ETHICAL AGENCY

Despite overwhelming coercion, *Harvest* foregrounds moments of resistance that affirm the possibility of ethical agency within oppressive systems. Jaya's refusal to accept further extractions and her attempt to reclaim bodily integrity symbolize a moral stand against dehumanization. Jeetu's tragic death—after InterPlanta harvests his eyes—serves as a powerful indictment of a system that treats human organs as mere commodities. Padmanabhan thus insists that genuine compassion and ethical responsibility demand more than passive compliance; they require active refusal of exploitative practices. By dramatizing both complicity and resistance, the play invites audiences to reflect on their own ethical obligations in a world where medical progress often masks deep-seated injustices.

### POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

*Harvest* transcends a simple cautionary tale about biotechnology; it offers a postcolonial critique of global

inequality. The play's setting—an impoverished Indian household—mirrors the exploitation of the Global South by wealthy nations that outsource their healthcare burdens. InterPlanta's dehumanizing transactions recall colonial resource extraction, where indigenous lives were sacrificed for imperial profit. Padmanabhan's narrative thus resonates with contemporary debates on medical tourism and transplant ethics, urging policymakers to consider how structural inequities distort the very notion of consent.

## CONCLUSION

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* remains a landmark work that interrogates the ethics of organ donation through the twin lenses of globalization and gendered power. By portraying a world in which corporate demands override bodily autonomy, Padmanabhan compels us to question the morality of transplant practices shaped by economic desperation. The play's fusion of dystopian fiction, feminist theory, and postcolonial critique offers a multidimensional exploration of exploitation, ultimately affirming the necessity of ethical agency in resisting dehumanizing systems. As real-world organ markets continue to expand, *Harvest* serves as a vital provocation: to ensure that compassion and justice guide biomedical progress rather than the profit motives of a privileged few.

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