

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV

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[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## ***Harvest: A Panoptic Power Structure***

**Roshni Prabhakaran**

Assistant Professor (ad-hoc)  
Malabar Christian College  
Calicut- 05

### **Abstract:**

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* is a futuristic play with an extended vision to 2010 that portrays the confinement of an middle class family of the third world to the tempting but illicit global economy of the first world. It is a dystopian play about an unemployed Indian man and his family who sells his body to a buyer in United States. This paper intends to bring out a panopticon power relation in the play through the neocolonial aid the 'contact module'. It draws out the implications of the Mephistophelian deal that eventually leads to annihilation.

**Keywords: futuristic, third world, panopticon, gaze, neocolonial.**

### **Introduction**

Manjula Padmanabhan's futuristic play *Harvest* (1997) which takes for its theme the purchase and sale of human organs is described on the cover blurb as ".....a dark, bitter, savagely funny vision of the cannibalistic future that awaits the human race...a parable of what will happen when the rich denizens of the First World...begin to devour bits and pieces of the Third World poor...".

The play is set in a Mumbai chawl in the year 2010. In a cramped one room tenement, reside four members: Om Prakash, the tense and jobless clerk, his wife Jaya, who has succumbed to the tense life of privation and insecurity, his old mother, the frustrated, ill-natured and satiric figure and his younger brother Jeetu who works surreptitiously as a gigolo. Om is dismissed from his petty clerical job and hence the family is thrown into economic and emotional disarray. Om and Jaya are only maintaining the semblance of a meaningful marital relationship. Jaya is carrying on a clandestine affair with her brother-in-law Jeetu. Mother's love extends only to the eldest son, Om, the bread-winner. She is also jealous of her Daughter-in-law. These four characters are locked in a loveless relationship, claustrophobically confines within the four walls of a one- room apartment.

### **Neocolonial intervention**

It is into this world of disorder that Inter Planta Services brings apparent order and respectability. Om is hired to donate the healthy organs of his body when required by the receiver. There occurs a radical change to their dingy room and it acquires an air of sophistication. The most important installation however, is the contact module placed at the centre of the room to facilitate communication between the receiver and the donor.

The contact module and the apparent order brought in by Inter Planta seem to create turmoil in personal relationships. Since Inter Planta needs only the services of the bachelors, Om is forced to conceal the fact that he is married and hence Jaya masquerades as his sister. Om and his family members appear to be unable to question the complete hijacking of their personal lives by Inter Planta. It is worth noting that while the receiver can see Om, his family members and all other aspects of his life, the donor Om, gets to see only the face of the receiver and her sugary voice(that too deceptive). 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.

Ginni (Virgil) informs Jaya that the contact module had spied on them, “Always I listened in to you, Zhaya. I heard every word in the room- even when the Module was off, it recorded.” (*Harvest* 94).

### **Constant gaze of colonizer**

The contact module thus seems to become a sort of demigod. It does not fail to remind Om that the slightest trace of dishonesty on his part can be detected. It induces a feeling of helplessness in the family. They are powerless to resist even as it begins to encroach upon their private lives. “Every sneeze, every belch” (*Harvest* 94) is noticed. The situation becomes unbearable when Ginni demands an accurate report of every sneeze and every smile. She compares Om’s flat to a “human goldfish bowl” (*Harvest* 43) which she can observe and amuse herself with.

### **Panopticon**

To this vision of powerlessness, we could associate Jeremy Bentham’s concept of ‘Panopticon’ as “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind”. French philosopher Michael Foucault looks at this as the paradigm of a sophisticated mechanism of observation and surveillance, as the ultimate surveillance system. This architectural Panopticon is a circular edifice with a tower at the centre that ensures constant observation of the inmates in the isolated cells of the outer ring, by a supervisor in the tower at the centre. The supervisor remains invisible to the inmates. The concept of the design is to allow a watchman to observe (*-opticon*) all (*pan-*) inmates of an institution without their being able to tell whether they are being watched or not. Bentham himself described the Panopticon as “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example.” Foucault terms this system of observation which renders the invisible power at the centre as ‘panoptic’. This could be read along with Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘Cultural Hegemony’ (control through consensus). Contemporary social critics often assert that technology has allowed for the operation of panoptic structures invisibly throughout society. The Panopticon creates a consciousness of permanent visibility as a form of power, where no bars, chains, and heavy locks are necessary for domination any more. Manjula Padmanabhan’s living room is reminiscent of the panoptic mechanism.

### **Panoptic power relation in family**

The victory of panoptic surveillance technique is evident when Om discourages Jaya’s decision to nurse Jeetu back to health after Jeetu’s return to home from a miserable existence on the pavements. Om sees this as a display of sentimentality, a weakness which he knows Ginni will disapprove of. It is apparent that Om is prepared to renounce familial ties even without Ginni asking him to do so. Michel Foucault described the implications of ‘Panopticism’ in his 1975 work *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* – “the major effect of the Panopticon is to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”. Om is, without his conscious knowledge, being made the tool for power.

A miniature version of the panoptic system can be perceived in Om’s mother’s total absorption in the fantasy world. She willingly shuts herself off from all outward manifestations of life. She is unmoved even as she sees her son Jeetu being taken away by the guards for an organ transplant by mistake. The Super Deluxe Video Couch she orders for herself is representative of her self-imposed withdrawal. Om’s mother’s renunciation of the world is complete, unhesitating and unquestioning. She chooses for herself electronic annihilation.

Jeetu in turn is also not able to resist the phony allurements offered by the screen image of Ginni, who is latter described as nothing but a “computer- animated wet dream” (*Harvest* 95). Actually the receiver was an old man, Virgil, who had deliberately misled Om Prakash and his

family, by projecting animated image of the seductive and lovely Ginny. Jeetu donates his organs willingly and is destroyed.

Amongst all these characters, the only one who is able to resist the inhuman situation is Jaya. She realizes that she has lost every member of her family- Om Prakash, her husband; Ma, her mother-in-law; and Jeetu, her brother-in-law. Now it's her turn, but she decides enough is enough, and says that if she is pushed against her will, she will kill herself, as she has nothing to lose, but in the process she will defeat the designs of the rich receiver. It is evident that she cannot resist the first world power structure through nothing but death, when she says,

"I've discovered a new definition for winning, winning by losing. I win if you lose. (Harvest 100)... If you want to play games with people, you should be careful not to push them off the board. You pushed me too far. Now there's nothing left for me to lose. (Harvest 101)... I am not willing to caretake my body for your sake! The only thing I have left which is still mine is death. My death and my pride." (Harvest 101).

### Conclusion

Thus the inmates of the Third world are trapped under the unrelenting gaze of the First world. This total deprivation of privacy can be interpreted as the ultimate form of surveillance. The only way one can salvage one's sense of pride and self-esteem is through a willingness to die if the need arises- and through great courage and self control. It is this panoptic nightmare of total visibility which *Harvest* seems to highlight. The horror of a callous acquisitive culture is what makes this play a shocking revelatory experience.

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