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SOCIO-ECONOMIC ETHOS IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *HARVEST*

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ABSTRACT

Indian Writing in English has contributed immensely to the world of literature. Of the Indian women dramatists, Dina Mehta and Manjula Padmanabhan seem to be engaged in a serious attempt to bring about a positive attitudinal change in women towards themselves as well as in society towards women. While Dina Mehta represents the modern period, Manjula Padmanabhan represents the contemporary drama to show that the women dramatists of Indian English drama, though very few in number, have emerged as a formidable force to reckon with in India and abroad. Manjula Padmanabhan as a dramatist infused new life into Indian English drama, created history when her *Harvest* (1998) won the first International Onassis Prize. This is first time that an Indian English dramatist has won an international competition abroad. This paper is an attempt to understand the Indian ethos as presented in the play *Harvest*. What we find in the play is the exploitation of the poor nations by the rich through the sale of body parts. The setting is in 2010 by which time it is assumed that the international sale of organs has developed into an industry by itself, wherein third world nations are patronized to provide organs for the first world.

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Indian Writing in English has contributed immensely to the world of literature. In this context it is useful to understand the evolution, existence and the very ethos of Indian English drama. The Indian English writer may he/she be a novelist, a poet or a dramatist has more than a century old tradition to fall back on. Of all the genres Indian English drama remains as a “plant of poor growth -”<sup>i</sup> unlike the Indian drama in the regional languages which has been showing remarkable development. Lack of living theatre, which will help a dramatist in evaluating the effect a drama may have on audience, probably must have discouraged writers from experimenting with this less popular literary form. During the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century dramatists like Dina Mehta, Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have come into prominence by writing and staging several of their plays. However, their plays are staged occasionally that too only in the metropolitan cities. Thus drama has come to be confined to mere reading at libraries or to one’s own study.

M.K.Naik in his critical survey of Indian English literature spanning over two decades 1800-2000, reiterates the fact that Indian English drama having its origins in the early thirties of 19th century is “yet to establish itself as a viable genre.”<sup>ii</sup> The critic observes that in spite of lack of living theatre, Indian English

writers continue to write plays, such is the glorious tradition of drama in India. However, the critic laments that "the sad Cinderella of Indian English literature from the beginning, drama remains its Cinderella still waiting..."<sup>iii</sup> The sad Cinderella has at last found its prince in the new generation of Indian English dramatists led by Girish Karnad and followed by Dina Mehta, Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan et al. These dramatists are seriously engaged in writing their plays in simple everyday speech concentrating on the mundane reality of the average life in India. Familial relationships and the contemporary socio-cultural scenario seem to be the favored themes of these dramatists.

There are several other contemporary dramatists like Poile Sen Gupta (*Mangalam*), Guracharan Das (*Larins sahib*) Snehalata Reddy (*Sita*), Shiv K Kumar (*The Last Wedding Anniversary*), Sharma (*The Early Bird*), Gieve Patil (*Prince*), Shashi Tharoor (*The Twenty two Months in The Life of A Dog: A Farce in Two Acts*), Khushwant Singh (*Not a Nice Man to Know*), Nassim Ezekiel (*Don't Call It Suicide*) et al who have made mark in Indian English drama. Of the Indian women dramatists, Dina Mehta and Manjula Padmanabhan seem to be engaged in a serious attempt to bring about a positive attitudinal change in women towards themselves as well as in society towards women. While Dina Mehta represents the modern period, Manjula Padmanabhan represents the contemporary drama to show that the women dramatists of Indian English drama, though very few in number, have emerged as a formidable force to reckon with in India and abroad. Manjula Padmanabhan as a dramatist infused new life into Indian English drama, created history when her *Harvest* (1998) won the first International Onassis Prize. This is first time that an Indian English dramatist has won an international competition abroad. This paper attempts to study the Indian ethos as presented in the play *Harvest*.

*Harvest*, Manjula Padmanabhan's fifth play is a "dystopian satire full of a psycho-economic aberration, challenging the social conscience of the western predator and the indifferent Indian bureaucrat...[with] no interest in intervening"<sup>iv</sup>. Padmanabhan wrote her play for the first International Onassis Competition knowing that "it too would almost certainly languish unseen, in her files if it didn't win anything in the competition"<sup>v</sup>. The play is also later made into film "*Deham*" by Govind Nehalani. What we find in *Harvest* is the exploitation of the poor nations by the rich through the sale of body parts. The setting is in near future 2010 by which time it is assumed that the international sale of organs has developed into an industry by itself, wherein third world nations are patronized to provide organs for the first world.

The action of the play revolves around two clearly defined groups the donors and the recipients of organs transplant. The play is set in an Indian metropolis, Mumbai, though not specifically mentioned. The chawls of Mumbai where the prospective donor live represents the third world and the recipients are represented by Ginni, Virgil and the guards, obviously American. Om the twenty year old eldest son of Ma is the head of the family. He has no job but is married to Jaya, may be in her late teens. Jaya with her passion for life is a contrast to her husband Om a man of self pity. The romantic angle of the play is provided in terms of a clandestine relationship that Jaya carries on with the husband's younger brother Jeetu, a gigolo who considers life a big joke.

The action of the play gains complexity with the guards from the interplanta service barging into Om's one room tenement to set up a module for the benefit of the unknown recipient from somewhere in the West so that she is constantly in contact with the donor. Om enters into a sale deal relating to the sale of his organs. He is made to believe that he is the chosen one, to receive a technologically advanced life style provided by the unknown recipient through interplanta services. Everything in that one room tenement, from food to toilets, gets replaced. Colorful pellets and powders substitute their normal food. In the cramped and polluted one room dwelling a toilet gets installed not to think of twenty four hours of water supply which otherwise is a distant dream. Ma gets enchanted with the sudden twist in their fortunes and watching T.V becomes her major activity of the day. As the eligibility criterion of the donor is that he or she should be unattached, Jaya is forced to take up the role of Om's sister so that the recipient who keeps twenty four hours Virgil over Om's activity is assured of Om's unattached status. Jeetu is the only man who remains impervious to the sudden wealth and prefers to live in the streets with his freedom intact.

It is the duty of interplanta services to provide all the material needs of Om so that he maintains perfect health. Om, to Ginni is nothing but a goose or a pig to be fattened before he is sent to a butcher. No wonder Ginni becomes an active head of the family controlling its every moment and movement through the contact module. Om and Ma get disgusted with Jeetu as he comes home with unkempt hair and his body full of dirt and disease. They fear what Ginni might say seeing him in that condition. Though Jeetu appears to be on the verge of death, Om tries to drive him out, lest an unhygienic and diseased human being should be spotted by Ginni. Either the mother or Om has any soft corner for Jeetu. Jaya is the only one who exhibits human concern for Jeetu. In a quick anticlimax that ensues when the guards knock at the door, Om becomes weak with fear and withdraws himself into a corner. In spite of several protests the guards lead the infected Jeetu away as the prospective donor, mistaking him for Om who remains a fattened goose back home. Jeetu's returning home completely blind is not the end of his ordeal with the recipient country. He can only see when Ginni projects video images straight into his mind through the contact module. Blinded, Jeetu thus is enchanted by the angelic vision of Ginni each time she addresses him in her sugar coated voice. Jeetu seeks sexual gratification in the possibility of a very important part of his body getting transplanted into Ginni's beautiful body. It is only when he is taken away for the second phase of transplantation that we come to know that the donor is made to surrender his whole body to the recipient and that he has no more claims on it. However, Jeetu under the spell of a prospective sexual enchantment with Ginni turns blind to the fact that he will be deprived of his body piece by piece, organ after organ. Nobody bothers about Jeetu's plight, not even his mother who luxuriates herself in a video couch watching T.V. Om the coward escapes from action leaving Jaya alone to face Ginni.

The lonely Jaya is shocked to realize that Ginni is only an animated wet dream produced by a computer and in fact it is the old Virgil who is the real recipient. Virgil who is hungry to regain his youth is not satisfied with the transplants from Jeetu's body and he sets out to seduce Jaya, for now the old man with youthful transplants craves for youthful female flesh. Jaya feels sick at the very idea of conceiving for a computer-projected image. Jaya who could not tolerate the very idea of being a wife to Om who is going to be deprived of his vital organs wants her man to be real. But Virgil refuses to take any risk of physically entering the disease-infected world of Jaya. She is even prepared to die instead of bearing a child to a computer image. Jaya remains undaunted with her spirit unconquered. Jaya is the only character who sustains her human sensibility throughout the play.

Though organ transplantation is the obvious theme of the play, it also deals with delicate interpersonal relationships between two men or two women or between a man and a woman revealing the inherent tensions and violence embedded in human relationships.

This intensely gripping drama can be studied and understood at different levels. At the very outset of the play the stark reality of familial relationships have been projected as those which can be sustained only when there is proper financial security:

Ma: "Oh of course not, your majesty! So high and mighty she is - staring out of her precious window! Stare all you like but it's useless. There's no chance he'll get the job."...

Jaya: "I'm not the one hoping!"

Ma: "Oh - I forgot! Missie Madam isn't hoping the best for her husband - like she should, like any dutiful, sane, reasonable, respectable wife - oh no!"

Ma: "oh she's just jealous, jealous! Can't bear to think of you being inside that foreign angel. After all, who wouldn't want to be inside such a divine being? Why - it would be indecent to object ... who knows? May be she'll even want you for a husband someday- why not? If my son's kidneys are good enough for her why not his -." (50)

Om's family struggling with the painful reality of life where even the basic needs of life are not met with is symbolic of all such similar families in India. Of the two sons of Ma one resorts to selling away his body bit by bit, while the other plunges headlong into illegal pursuits. Finally both the sons fall victims to the allurements of wealth and excess freedom.

Om: "It's like Ginni says - the curse of the Donor World is sentimentality-... Here I am, willing to give my whole body to improve our lives and what're you doing? Endangering the whole project by feeling up your brother-in-law". (49)

Jeetu: "Well. It would have made all the difference if I had known. I saw all of her, you know! Standing there (he draws her with his arms), all of her ... wearing... almost *nothing!* (Jaya bites her lip, frowning) And she kept... (he moves his body sensuously) moving, like this, like that ... wah! I could have had her, right there and then!". (81)

Ironically Ma, the mother of the two sons is portrayed, as a highly possessive woman whose chief concern is her own pleasure and welfare. As a mother, she does only on her elder son and disowns the younger as the former is the one who provides for her, says Ma of Om:

..." Bring him a glass of milk! Bring him two glasses!...come here, my darling boy! My only delight! Let your old mother hug you to her belly!".(10)

And of Jeetu,

Ma " Huh! That pimping rascal! That soul's disgrace! ... Nah. The gods left a jackal in my belly by mistake when they made him - maybe that's why *you* like him- he's just like you, rude, insolent, ungrateful -" (8)

The scornful nagging Ma, spends all her time reproaching Jaya, the daughter-in-law with her caustic speech while luxuriating herself in the new found riches. Ma even orders for a video couch without the knowledge of anyone in the house -

Agent-1 " This is the Super Deluxe Video Couch model XL 5000!

We are certain it will provide you, our valued customer, with every satisfaction! This is the nourishment panel- the hydration filter - the Pangrometer! Here you see the Lexus Phantasticon which is programmed to receive seven hundred and fifty video channels form all over the"

Jaya: "Stop this at once! Explain to me what's going on!"

Agent-1: "Ma'm-"

Ma: "Can't you shut up? It's my Video Couch! It's what I ordered the other day!"(85)

If there is one strong voice that speaks through these fluid and fractured relationships, it is the voice of Jaya, Om's wife. Jaya is the only evolved character in the play who accepts the grimness of the situation with utmost responsibility towards herself, while all the other three characters are dominated by their greed and selfishness.

Jaya of Om:

"He can't face things. He never could ... this whole dream will come crashing down around us! The grey guards will come and take everything back! ... what d'you think – it's your birthright? To have all this water, these gadgets? The moment Ginni finds out what's happened to her little pet, she'll have the place emptied-(56-57)

I don't care, I don't care anymore -... what's the worst they can do? Take away what was never ours to begin with -" (59)

Jaya emerges as strong a woman who understands that she has every right to choose from life what she prefers and succeeds in making her own choice.

Jaya: "No! You listen to me! I want to be left alone - truly alone. I don't want to hear any sounds, I don't want any disturbances. I'm going to take my pills, watch TV, have a dozen baths a day, eat for three instead of one. For the first time in my life and maybe the last time of my life, I'm going to enjoy myself, all by myself. I suggest you take some rest. You have a long journey ahead of you and it's sure to be a hard one". (102)

She is not ashamed of her extramarital relationship with the brother-in-law as she doesn't crave for mere physical gratification from a man; she needs something more than that, an emotionally fulfilling experience.

This is proved towards end of the play when she rejects the offer of motherhood from Virgil. A sensuous lady who celebrates human touch Jay is determined to enjoy herself.

"... I don't want to know a ghost! .... I want real hands touching me! I want to feel a real weight upon me! Hear your breath in my ear- feel my hair being pulled, sweat running in my mouth-" (99)

Jay's response to her inconsiderate mother-in-law who doesn't understand Om's business deal speaks of Jaya's pragmatic and earthy attitudes towards man-woman relationships.

Jaya "I'll tell you! He's sold the rights to his organs!  
His skin. His eyes ... sold them! ... Oh God, oh God! What's the meaning of this nightmare! ... How can I hold your hand, touch your face, knowing that at any moment it might be snatched away from me and flung across the globe! ... If you were dead I could shave my head and break my bangles - but this? To be a widow by slow degrees? To mourn you piece by piece? ... Should I shave half my head? Break my bangles one at a time?" (23)

In a world that can easily be seduced by money sale of bodily parts is the ultimate fallout of human impoverishment as well greed. Om Jeetu and Ma are symbols of endless human greed. They prove that one who chooses an easy way out in a crisis of any kind does not really care for one's own people.

Jeetu " She exists. That's enough for me.  
She's a goddess and she exists. I  
would do anything for her- anything!" (81)

The title **Harvest** itself is symbolic of the maxim that one reaps what one sows. Mindless chasing of money which has become the order of the day, leads to total breakdown of human values and family, the very basic structure of human societies all over the world. In the present electronic age it's the dollar power that rules the roost. Manjula Padmanabhan's play **Harvest** is a warning to 'those who mistake wealth for happiness'.

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