

**Research Article**

## **Refiguring Identity and the Body in a Posthumanist Globalised South Asia: A Study of Manjula Padmanabhan's "Harvest"**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the representation of post-colonial identity, cultural heritage, and socio-political dynamics in Indian literature, with a particular focus on works like *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan. Through an in-depth analysis of the themes of globalization, alienation, and the body, the study examines the intersection of cultural identity and post-colonial narratives. The works discussed reveal the complexities of individual and collective identity in a rapidly globalizing world, where technology and socio-political structures shape human lives and relationships. Additionally, the paper investigates how these narratives challenge traditional boundaries and engage with critical discussions of eugenics, organ trafficking, and biotechnology, exploring the evolving power dynamics in a globalized society. Using a multidisciplinary lens that includes postmodernism, disability studies, and posthumanism, the paper articulates the ways in which literature contributes to the discourse surrounding the marginalized, while also reflecting on the tensions between the globalizing forces and local identities in the South Asian context.

**Keywords:** Post-colonial identity, globalization, organ trafficking, eugenics, disability studies, biotechnology, cultural heritage, posthumanism.

Indian writing in English is a rich tapestry that captures the complexities of identity, globalization, and the socio-political dimensions of a rapidly evolving society. It reflects not only the nation's cultural heritage but also its confrontations with modernity, technology, and global inequity. Manjula Padmanabhan is a distinguished Indian writer, playwright, and artist known for her bold engagement with futuristic and dystopian themes. Her play *Harvest* is a powerful example of speculative fiction that interrogates the ethics of body commodification, surveillance, and exploitation in a globalized world. Through sharp dialogue and vivid characterization, Padmanabhan critiques the dehumanizing effects of capitalism and technological dominance, particularly on the marginalized. She crafts a narrative space where human emotions like fear, sacrifice, and love are entangled with political issues such as poverty, health disparity, and bioethics. *Harvest* stands as a significant contribution to Indian English literature, offering a provocative lens into the psychological and societal consequences of global bio-exchange and posthuman existence.

Postmodernism, with its deep skepticism of essentialism, critiques the idea that identity is rooted in the body. Instead, postmodern theorists of race, gender, and ethnicity emphasize social constructionism and performativity as primary frameworks for understanding identity. However, this stance brings forth a fundamental crisis in the politics of identity formation—

questioning whether all identities are indeed performative or socially constructed. Ian Hacking, in *The Social Construction of What?*, critiques the vagueness and theoretical underdevelopment of such positions (Davis 235).

This epistemological limitation becomes especially visible when engaging with identities such as disability, where embodiment cannot be discarded or fully explained through performance. Lennard J. Davis proposes the framework of "dismodernism" to accommodate the complex identity of disabled individuals (233). In dismodernist thinking, technology is not separate from the body; rather, it becomes part of the body. Mutual interdependence replaces individual autonomy, and the premise "form follows dysfunction" underscores the universality of bodily imperfection (239). Davis's dismodernist subject is marked by wounding and dependency and follows an ethic of "care of the body," "care for the body," and "care about the body" (239–40).

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* vividly enacts this dismodernist vision by presenting a bleak and dystopian future where everyone is "probably suffering from some illness," irrespective of the orient or the occident (Padmanabhan 21). In this world, disability is not merely a consequence of aging or poverty but is manufactured by a system driven by organ harvesting and transplantation. Organ trafficking becomes a symptom of a neoliberal market that commodifies human bodies. At the 2008 Istanbul Summit, professionals denounced organ trafficking as organized crime and a potential crime against humanity. Nancy Scheper-Hughes uses terms such as "neocannibalism," "bio-terrorism," and "bio-theft" to describe this practice, referring to surgeons as "vultures" and recruiters as "kidney-hunters."

Scheper-Hughes's four C's—Consumption, Consent, Coercion, and Commodification—frame the complex ethics of this global trade. Through the Organs Watch Project, she criticizes "transplant tourism" as nothing but a sanitized term for the unethical consumption of bodies by the global elite. Turkey emerges as a key hub in this illicit exchange between East and West. In such a world, biotechnology and capitalism conspire to create "super-citizens" and "sub-citizens," where even wombs are rented and organs are harvested from prisoners, the mentally ill, and children—what Franco Basaglia calls "peace-time crimes."

In *Harvest*, Ginni refers to organs as "smiling organs" (38), while Om confesses, "I live only for your benefit" (40). The body is reduced to a mere vessel, an object for extraction. Jaya's womb becomes a reproductive machine for Virgil, who tells her, "We're interested in women, where I live, Zhaya. Child-bearing women" (85). This mirrors the consumptive attitude of the first world towards the third, as seen in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (Vallath). Surveillance plays a critical role in this system of domination. Inter Planta Services imposes strict monitoring: "To remain employed, we have to keep ourselves exactly as they tell us" (Padmanabhan 13). Even food is rebranded as "fuel," reducing people to machines maintained for optimal performance.

Poverty drives this commodification of the body. Om's anger reflects the desperation: "Living day in day out, like monkeys in a hot case ... starving" (20–21). The poor are trapped in a grim food chain, where they are both consumers and consumed: "Oh yes, she cares – just as much as she cares about the chicken she eats for dinner" (47). Jaya frequently refers to Om as food—"an angel who shares her bed with her dinner?" (48), "fattened broiler" (50). The Faustian motif pervades the narrative. Like Faustus, Om trades his body, and when it is time to deliver, he exclaims, "My legs! My legs refuse to move!" (50). Jeetu's man-made impairment exemplifies strategic disablement, a state wherein the impaired person is made desperate to offer up more body parts: "I was blind! And now I have the chance to see again" (71).

The state's indifference to these abuses echoes David Cameron's 'Big Society', which valorizes self-reliance and ignores the structural causes of poverty (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 881).

This model aligns with charity-based, rather than rights-based, views of disability. The poor are judged for their worthiness before being helped—echoing the Poor Laws of 1601 and 1834 (884). As Om bitterly notes, “There are no laws to protect strays like him” (62). Within the third world, these victims form a ‘fourth world’ (Vallath), reminiscent of early imperial slave trade.

The posthumanist critique surfaces throughout the play, especially in the way Ginni disciplines donor bodies: “You must eat at regular hours, okay? We’ve had this problem before!” (37). Her patronizing attitude reinforces the master/slave dynamic and highlights the cultural imperialism of the West. Her comments on “face saving” as part of Indian culture reveal her condescension (37). Even the comforting language used by the recipients is manipulative: “It’s our pleasure! Our duty, I mean! Anything we can do to help” (23).

Padmanabhan’s play aligns with Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and hyperreality. The difference between virtual and real is blurred—Ginni deceives Jeetu through holographic simulation: “Those plants! That light! What are those things there? It’s ... beautiful” (69). Sexual desire is manipulated via virtual images: “I’m beaming my video image straight into your mind!” (69). Jeetu, captivated by the simulation, exclaims, “She’s a goddess and she exists. I’d do anything for her – anything!” (72). This is hyperreality—where the image becomes more real than reality itself, severing the connection with lived experience.

For Jaya, pain is a marker of embodied subjectivity. “The pain tells me that I’m alive. I want the pain!” (88). Death becomes the only form of resistance: “I’ll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman” (91). Even domestic spaces are colonized by technology. Ma, like Nell in Beckett’s *Endgame*, chooses to die in the VideoCouch, which she compares to “Tutankhamen’s sarcophagus” (76).

Virgil’s declaration—“This is my fourth body in fifty years” (86)—captures the transhumanist dream of immortality. The soul changes bodies like clothes: “This body which once belonged to Jittoo now contains a red-blooded all-American man!” (87). Om’s lament, “Because I am a clerk and nobody needs clerks any more” (62), reflects the anxiety of obsolescence echoed in Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. As machine replaces man, new discourses like cyborg anthropology emerge to bridge the gap between humans and machines (Downey et al. 265). This interdisciplinary field critiques human-centric knowledge, considers machines as agents, and studies their role in social life.

The 21st century is post-anthropocentric. G. N. Devy predicts future wars will be fought not among humans, but between humans and environmental or non-human agents. The COVID-19 pandemic is one such war. Jeetu’s dehumanization is stark: “They bathe him in praise while gutting him like a chicken!” (Padmanabhan 22). As Virgil admits, “We secured Paradise at the cost of birds and flowers, bees and snakes!” (86).

Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* engages with posthumanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism. Bart Simon distinguishes between popular posthumanism, which reacts with dystopian fear (as in Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future*), and critical posthumanism, which challenges the Cartesian cogito and human exceptionalism (Wallace 692–93). Donna Haraway’s ‘cyborg’ concept bridges the human-machine divide. N. Katherine Hayles critiques the Western humanist idea of the autonomous, willful subject (286).

Though *Harvest* initially seems aligned with the fear-driven narrative of popular posthumanism, a deeper reading reveals Padmanabhan’s alignment with critical posthumanism. She critiques humanist ideals by portraying Virgil as the epitome of the privileged Western subject. Her call is not merely to reject technology, but to re-theorize identity through empathy, interdependence,

and resistance—thus crossing the boundaries of postmodern subjectivity and forging a dismodern, posthumanist vision grounded in embodied, inclusive identity.

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**Citation:** G. Radha Madhavi 2024. "Refiguring Identity and the Body in a Posthumanist Globalised South Asia: A Study of Manjula Padmanabhan's "Harvest"". *International Journal of Academic Research*, 11(4): 216-219.

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