



## **Dystopian Element in Manjula Padmanabhan's Play *Harvest***

**Dr. A.V.V.V.Malleswaramma**, Lecturer in English, V.S.R Govt.Degree & P.G College,  
Movva.

**D.Suresh**. JKC Full Time Menotor, V.S.R Govt.Degree & P.G College, Movva.

Dystopian literature is a form of exploratory creative writing that began as a response to utopian literature. A dystopia is an imagined community or society that is dehumanizing and frightening. The dystopian theme narrates the story of survival of the individual, oppression and sometimes rebellion. The term dystopia (a bad place-Greek) is formulated as a complement of utopia, which depicts an ideal society. Dystopia, anti-utopia, is the nastiest probable world humanity can predict, and usually it is situated in the future. Tom Moylan expresses:

Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century: A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, decess, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of the everyday life provided more than enough fertile 41 ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination. <sup>1</sup>

Manjula Padmanabhan's (born 1953) *Harvest* depicts some of the aspects of the dystopian theory excellently. She is an Indian playwright, journalist, comic strip artist, and children's book author. She won the Greek Onassis Award for her play *Harvest*. Dr. Saurabh Bhattacharyya writes that in the play:

“the ethical aspect of medical technology is questioned drawing its relevance from a post-independent India in which medical technology, often at the expense of other sections of society, has become a consumable article for the rich and the powerful”<sup>2</sup> (:2014).

The characteristics of dystopian literature describe different aspects that are prevalent in the society. One of them is restrictions regarding information. Independent thought and freedom are also restricted. Manjula Padmanabhan's play deals with exploitation of a jobless youth Om Prakash and his assignation with fate when he is stressed to sell his organs to a



multinational company named Interplanta Services to survive with his family which is dependant on him. After proper scrutiny of his body by Interplanta, Om returned to home with a starter kit. The guards install a contact module through which the Receiver, Virginia (Ginny) keeps in touch with the Donor. Thus he is kept under control. His only contact module is Ginni.

Next characteristic is control on independent thought and freedom. The household gadgets are replaced by company gadgets. Food is replaced by coloured pellets and powders, the one room dwelling is provided with a toilet and a television to which Ma remains occupied all the time. Thus the family is kept indoors without any communication with the outer world. Thus they control the family. It is under constant surveillance of Ginni. The family is under technological control. Om's wife Jaya forgoes the right of identifying herself as his wife. She pretends like Om's sister, as his single status is an important criteria for the Donors selected for organ transplantation by Interplanta Services. Moreover Jaya has to tell that she is the wife of Jeetu, Om's brother.

Guard1: Relationship with Donor?

Jaya: Sister

*Ma registers a shock. Her hand to her mouth, she seems to hold in her words manually. Then her hand goes to her heart...*

Guard1: Right. Husband?

Jaya: At Work.

Guard1: Full name?

Jaya: Jeetu- Jeeten Kumar.

*Ma's body jerks like a puppet. She reins in her comments with ferocious effort*

(Harvest 17,18)

They fear of Guards as knowing the truth may lose their chance of getting wealthier.

Loss of individualism is another trait of dystopia. The playwright draws a bleak image of how the western influence will take on the life of the third world deprived in future. The play's luminous satire completely takes in First World attitudes toward India, its fear of adversity, its concern about hygiene, its conception of family and social life, its unawareness of Third World reality altogether. Replacing the family's food with "goat- shit" pellets,



installing a toilet and shower in the middle of the one – room apartment, dumping the family’s possessions and replacing them with Western clothes and house wares, Interplanta at once appears to progress the family’s standard of living while cutting it off from real life altogether. Thus the family loses its individuality. They live according to the provisions that are supplied by the Interpalnta. Rajkumar (2012:50) explains:

Harvest is an ironic examination of the relations between developing and developed countries. The play is set in the imminent future, it imagines a grisly pact between the first and third world desperate (sic) people who can sell their body parts to wealthy clients in return for food, water, shelter and riches for themselves and their families.<sup>3</sup>

Padmanabhan portrays India as a very vulnerable and feeble country in the hands of America which is representing other advanced world. So depiction of survival condition, another characteristic of dystopia in the play portrays how helpless the family becomes in the hands of Interplanta. Survival is the state or fact of continuing to live or exist, typically in spite of an accident, ordeal, or difficult circumstances. The jobless Om’s desire of glittering consumer world and social mobility towards upper classes makes him to enter into a ‘Faustian pact’ with an organization from a developed country. He explains his mother , “We’ll have more money than you and I have names for! Who’d believe there’s so much money in the world?” (Padmanabhan, 219). The play clearly shows that appearing for the recruitment process in the transaction of body organ is not a chance rather his approach to this ‘Faustian pact’ is visceral, and not logical, arising from the circumstances of desire of social mobility and increase in consumption of consumer products. So his pact with the company is not for mere survival but life with comforts.

To gain that job Om has to be unmarried so he turns his wife into his sister and Jeetu, brother-in-law of Jaya, becomes her husband, so obviously every relationship in the family has been altered. For Om, merely mentioning or changing the relationship on paper does not change the relationship at all as he has been left with no option but to grab this job for which he has to forsake the husband-wife relation, at least on paper. But what psychological impact Jaya has to undergo for this newly imposed relationship, no one bothers about that as their main concern is to acquire the bliss of materialism or consumer products:



JAYA: And calling me your sister – what’s that? If I’m your sister, what does that make you? Sister, huh! My forehead burns, when I say that word, ‘sister’! [. . .]

OM: You think I did it lightly. But at the cost of calling you my sister . . . we’ll be *rich*! Very rich! Insanely rich! But you’d rather live in this one small room, I suppose! Think it’s such a fine thing – living day in, day out, like monkeys in a hot-case – lulled to sleep by our neighbours’ rhythmic farting! Dancing to the tune of the melodious traffic! And starving. Yes, you’d prefer this to being called my sister on a stupid slip of paper no-one we know will ever see! (Padmanabhan 223).

On the one hand, the above conversation pinpoints on the helplessness of Om in resolving the miserable financial and social conditions of his family, but on the other hand it also focuses on his willingness to become a part of the consumer market for which he has paid dearly. Ma is indifferent towards the new relationship as she is interested to know more about the ‘rich’ employer of Om, and Jeetu has got freedom to continue his extra marital affair with Jaya in more casual manner. Only Jaya shows some resistance towards it but finds herself in helpless condition in front of everyone’s materialistic pursuit. The corrosive influence of materialistic desire and consumer culture disintegrates the whole family.

The steady shameful modus operandi of Ma is not only harrowing but also overwhelming for the readers to the distressing outcome of selfish craving. Her concern of the well being of Om she slides down into the world of implicit veracity and she is occupied with watching TV persistently. Earlier she was decisive of happenings in the family but later on she turns into a taciturn outsider. She remains apathetic when Jeetu is wrongly taken away or returns as a blind man. Her conversion from a human being of flesh and blood to her ultra dependency on a consumer product—‘Super Deluxe Video Couch, an epitome of super consumer product’ which is self-reliant to accomplish all sorts of requirements of self is shocking. Thus she fulfils her desire to be controlled by a virtual world where she has encased herself, is in fact the current quandary of human beings who stay on egotistical in their own implicit and imaginary world controlled by the consumer culture.

Om feels proud of proving himself having better exchange rate in the marketplace. But he identifies the crack between Jaya and himself. On identifying the type of frantic act



he has been mixed up to, he transforms into an abject situation and his remorse and lament for getaway from the frantic state is catastrophic:

How could I have done this to myself? What sort of fool am I? [. . .] Whoever opens that door is my murderer, my assassin – [. . .] No!! I beg of you – please! Please! Leave that cursed door alone! [. . .] (*sinks to the floor*) I'll hide in the fridge. I'll just crawl along here, all the way to the fridge and I'll sit there, yes – (Padmanabhan 234)

This play depicts the crumbling of societal and familial relationship due to the increasing utilization of punter products and unending worldly chase of human beings. Moreover it predicts the operative of urban countries in the developing countries to proliferate the concept of materialism for greed. The dystopian element is evident in all the situations throughout the play. Madhu Jain in the book review comments:

The three-act play is set in some grey, almost anaesthetised near-future. And the future is used as a magnifying lens to look at a greedy and dead-end present - a soulless world without exits.<sup>4</sup>

*Harvest* deals with the urban frustration that Om Prakash faces, as well unfolds the creepy and bona fide prospect of how technology could make transfer of human organs trouble-free in the near future i.e. dystopian future.

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Industrial Engineering Journal

ISSN: 0970-2555

Volume : 52, Issue 10, October : 2023

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