

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE CORRODING HUMAN VALUES: ANALYSIS OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S HARVEST

**Dr Payal Khurana**

Assistant Professor (Selection Grade)  
The NorthCap University  
Gurugram-122017  
Haryana, India  
payalksoni@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Manjula Padmanabhan has written the play Harvest (1997), with a futuristic vision set in 2010. She has put Indian dramatists on the map by winning 'Onassis Prize' for the best new international play in 1997 for Harvest. The paper under study highlights many themes that can be observed in a contemporary society like issues of unemployment, poverty, treating human beings as commodities, materialism, failure of human relationships etc. In fact, it brings forth a very scary picture of human society to the forefront. The play also deals with the sensitive topic of organ donation, which has become a big industry nowadays. It also highlights the degradation of human values and the eminent presence and usage of technology, which has become a stark reality in contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** futuristic, contemporary, degradation

## INTRODUCTION

*Harvest (1997)* a futuristic play written by Manjula Padmanabhan, throws light on the different aspects of post-colonialism and westernization. In this play, she has projected a debased and degraded picture of contemporary human society. As can be seen nowadays, people are drawn towards materialism and are leading materialistic life, thus compromising their relationships and values. Being rich and leading a comfortable luxurious life seems to be the only motive, which is further downplayed by the selling of human organs and intervention of technology in everyday life. This play very vividly brings to the surface the impact of technology on the poor, and how their desire to go up the ladder leads to the breakdown of societal and moral values, and the disintegration of society.

## DISCUSSION

*Harvest* is a play about an Indian family with one of the main characters of a man around 20 years old, who sells his body to a buyer in the United States, whom he has never seen or met. The story revolves around a family of four; Om Prakash, who has signed a pact to sell his body organs, lives in one small room with his mother, wife Jaya, and younger brother Jeetu. He lost his job because he was not proficient in computer skills, which was the need of the hour. It signified that survival of people to earn their daily bread and butter was difficult in technologically progressive world. Technology though important has taken up the job of many. Since Om had no other means to make the ends meet, he takes up this job of selling his organs which promises him to earn lots of money, which he had never even dreamt of, and fulfill his dream of leading a comfortable luxurious life.

Om's mother is the conventional mother-in-law as depicted in the Indian setting. She cares more for her son than her daughter-in-law and leaves no chance to insult or torture her with her stinging words. Jaya, Om's wife is shown as the only practical person who understands reality and is not ready to accept or do anything wrong, nor is blinded by the money that her husband's new job of organ selling would bring.

Jeetu, who is younger brother of Om, is a male prostitute and their mother dislikes Jeetu because of his inability to earn enough money to provide food or run the household. To earn money both the brothers have chosen diverse ways which have led to the degradation of values and human relationships and this theme has been very deftly woven into this play.

Jaya knows about the new job of selling organs that her husband Om has taken up and resents it. She is a devoted housewife but can't come to terms with her husband losing his vital organs in pursuit of money. Her mother is happy to know about her son's new job, though she is not aware of the exact nature of the job her son has taken up, nor does she show any interest in knowing the details. All that mattered to her was that her son

would earn good money. She is fascinated at the thought of leading a comfortable and luxurious life and readily expresses her adaptability to the new life that money will bring. Illustrations in the play show that the mother's affection is more for money than her love for her sons. Om is valued more than Jeetu because he will bring in more money whereas Jeetu is not able to provide enough. She treats her sons like commodities to be sold in the market with a good return value.

Om is dazzled by the money he will get by selling his organs. He negates his wife's pleas to not take up the job. All she wants is a complete man and can't digest the idea of him losing his organs for gaining money. He is blinded by his desire to go up the social ladder and acquire all the comforts he could never dream of attaining in his lifetime. He tells 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) It is a fact that money is required for everything but to cross the limits and taking up the job of selling one's organs to become rich can be compared to Christopher Marlowe's character 'Dr Faustus', who enters into a deal with a devil Mephostophilis, to sell his soul. Similarly, Om is ready to sell his body parts without thinking about the consequences even after being warned by his wife Jaya. His new job requires him to lead a healthy stress-free life-style, taking good diet, and dwell in a hygienic environment so that the organs are nourished well before transplanting.

Technology is always there to assist him in monitoring his healthy life style. There is a surveillance system installed that checks the body organs to determine whether they are healthy and ready to be donated. Human beings are reduced to commodities to be used for gains in the commercial market. They are treated like machines that are technology driven, without any feelings or emotions.

Om's new job of organ donation requires that one has to be unmarried. To fulfill this prerequisite, he lies that he's a bachelor and when the officials come to his place to verify the information provided by him, he introduces Jaya as his sister, and Jeetu as Jaya's husband. It shows complete disintegration of human values that have lost sheen in this materialistic consumer driven world. No one, except Jaya, objects to this changed sequence of relations. Everyone is blinded by the comfort that money would bring, thus making pushing them towards dystopian existence, where emotions, love, care relationships don't have any importance. Jaya retorts to this change of relations: "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'! ..... (Padmanabhan, 203). Om tries to pacify her by saying: "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 will ever see! (Padmanabhan, 203)

The above conversation clearly shows that humans are becoming lifeless, valueless, emotionless beings like zombies, devoid of any love. Even Om's mother is indifferent to this new normal of altered relationships and does not even utter a word to oppose the new arrangement of relationships. Jeetu is also happy with the new arrangement as he had always wanted to get close to Jaya and now can openly have an extra-marital relationship with his sister-in-law Jaya. This shows that the very fabric of society is shredded into pieces. Jaya shows resistance but is helpless and feels lost in the 'new normal' setup.

Om's organ transplant company, Interplant Services, sets up a module in the center of Om's one-room dwelling, which gives entry to the owner, Ginni, in the lives of Om's family. Every action, every movement, and conversation of theirs is monitored, and Om and his family are totally ignorant about it. No information is shared with them regarding the monitoring and is kept totally in the dark. His one-room dwelling is given a make-over and everything is replaced by new things from the toilet to food. They are even given a new television set, further highlighting the entrance of technology dominating human lives. Om's mother is addicted to reality TV Shows and becomes oblivious to what's happening around her.

Jeetu doesn't become a part to this luxurious lifestyle and is happy spending his time on the streets as a male prostitute. Om, on the other hand, is fed well with a regulated nutritious diet. When Jeetu one day comes home in a very filthy diseased condition, Om and his mother despise the very sight of him. They want to send him out of their house but are unable to do so with the arrival of guards of Implanta Service. Guards take Jeetu with them considering him as the prospective donor. Om hides and doesn't try to protect his brother. Jeetu is sent back home in a dismantled condition. His eyes are gone making him completely blind. Om's house is controlled by the module set up in his home. All they hear is the sweet voice of the unseen owner, 'Ginni', who has hacked their life and mind. The occupants have become a servant to technology as they act according to the automated voice they hear. Jeetu, now blind, can only see the computerized video images projected in his eyes. He is sexually enchanted by Ginni's voice and gets sexual gratification through images of Ginni flashed in his eyes. Jeetu is taken again by the guards of Interplanta Services for the second time, which leads to his complete dismantling. He is also oblivious to the fact that all his body parts are taken away. Everyone is so lost in their own world which is completely devoid of concern, care emotions for their family. All they care for is themselves, and show no concern for the miserable plight of Jeetu. Familial bond is shattered; human touch is lost in the pursuit of material gains.

Though the play was written with a futuristic vision set in 2010, all the fallacies and disintegration of society highlighted, have become the very essence of contemporary society, leading to mayhem and chaos all around.

We, living in the present day, can relate to the invasion of technology, hacking our life, mind, and relationships. Technology has taken away the real bonding of humans and we are more bonded with our gadgets. This is a stark reality of contemporary society worldwide: Materialistic pursuits have led to the breaking of homes; love, care and emotions have been replaced by technology.

Jaya is the only person who is able to make out that 'Ginni' is not a real person but an animated computerized vision. It's actually an old rich man, residing in the United States, named Virgil, hidden in the guise of a computerized image 'Ginni', who wanted to rejuvenate his whole body and has used Jeetu's young body organs to be replaced by his old ones. After transplantation, Virgil's young organs crave for Jaya's youthful body. Getting physically involved does not go well with Jaya and resents it completely. Virgil doesn't want to get physically involved with her directly because he fears that he may catch some disease. She refuses his proposal to bear his child since the very idea of conceiving with computer images makes her obnoxious. She asserts her viewpoint, "... 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." (Padmanabhan, 99)

## CONCLUSION

Unemployment and poverty are the root cause of deviating people from their values, which is at their peak nowadays. To become rich and acquire money the easy way is the new mantra and bitter truth of contemporary society. People are getting involved in the mad rush to become rich and can take shortcuts to be a member of the elite. Everyone wants to gain without pain and can compromise with their values, tradition, and relations. The 'New Normal' is not normal but an absurd and dystopian existence, leading to doom for mankind. In fact, as the title *Harvest* signifies, humans have harvested a very gloomy and doomed life for themselves, which will lead to nowhere but destruction.

## REFERENCES

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