

Intersection of Artificial Intelligence and Body Politics in Manjula Padmanabhan's play Harvest

Annie Lumina. A

M.A. English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India

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ABSTRACT

Manjula Padmanabhan is a famous Indian author, playwright, and journalist. Her play Harvest, published in 1997, won Greece's first-ever Onassis Award for theatre. This play is about Om Prakash, a jobless Indian married man who agrees to sell his organs to a foreign company. In the play, Manjula Padmanabhan focuses on how Third-world body commodification is done through AI. We encounter a virtual figure named Ginni who controls Om, his wife Jaya, and his family through a virtual device called the Contact module. Here, AI is used for surveillance where the rich individuals who rent the body of Om's constantly monitor via AI-based surveillance system. The system ensures that each individual in the family is adhering to certain protocols set by them and controlling their personal choices. This use of AI amplifies the exploitation of vulnerable bodies, especially women with the focus of child bearing. One of the disturbing impacts of the intersection between AI and body politics in Harvest is the loss of individual autonomy. The play suggests that when AI takes over the management of the body, human beings lose control over their own lives. It is not about enhancing human capability, but rather stripping individuals of their autonomy, reducing them to mere instruments for First-world profit. Thus, intersection of AI and body politics illustrates the potential for technology to reinforce social hierarchies through the bodies.

Keywords: Body commodification, Surveillance, Individual autonomy, social hierarchy, First world profit

I. INTRODUCTION

Manjula Padmanabhan is the famous Indian author, playwright, and artist who is known for her contributions to literature, theater, and visual arts.

She has written many novels, short stories, and plays which often portrayed complex social issues. Her work has a unique blend of realism, satire, and speculative fiction. Manjula Padmanabhan uses her writing to explore the themes of gender, power, and

human relationships within the context of technology, surveillance, and the effects of globalization. Padmanabhan gained widespread recognition with her acclaimed play *Harvest* (1997), a dystopian commentary on the exploitation of the poor for organ harvesting, which won several prestigious awards. As a novelist, her works such as *Escape* (1994) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2007) further established her as a prominent voice in Indian literature, combining the elements of science fiction with sharp social criticism. Her contributions to Indian literature and theater have earned her numerous awards, and her plays have been staged internationally.

About the play:

Manjula Padmanabhan has been known for her bold explorations of contemporary issues and her ability to create deeply engaging narratives across multiple artistic forms. One among them is her play "*Harvest*". It is a dystopian, satirical drama that explores themes of human exploitation, bioethics, economic disparity, and the effects of globalization caused due to technology on society. The portrayal of the story in realistic manner made it to receive Greece's first-ever Onassis Award for theatre.

II. PLOT SUMMARY

The play centers around a family living in a dystopian society, where technology and wealth have created stark division between the rich and the poor. The family consists of a widowed mother, two sons named Om and Jeetu, and the wife of the first son named Jaya. The first son, Om, is the protagonist, and his life becomes intertwined with a powerful foreign corporation that seeks to harvest his organs for transplantation into a wealthy recipient. Om, who is struggling with poverty, is lured into an agreement with the corporation that offers him money in exchange for his organs. However, the deal comes at a personal cost. They soon realize the consequences of

their decision where each of the character meet their destined fate.

AI and Body politics:

Before dwelling into the intersection of AI and Body politics, it is important to know the definition to understand it better. According to NASA, the definition of AI is as follows, "An artificial system developed in computer software... that solves tasks requiring human-like perception, cognition, planning, learning, communication, or physical action." And Body Politics can be defined as "The term *body politics* refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as the struggle over the degree of individual and social control of the body." (Encyclopedia). Thus, the definitions convey how AI is designed to think and do like human beings. But at the same time, it plays a vital role in controlling the thought process and actions of human beings too.

AI – A tool for Body politics:

1. Weapon for Control

Technology creates a simulation of life for the rich, while the poor are left to deal with the harsh realities of living in their bodies, which are subject to the will of those who control them. This can be seen in the beginning of the play where Om says "All in iron bars and grills...a cage shaped like a tunnel" – about the Interplanta service company. The AI systems that manage these virtual realities or controlled bodies may prevent any genuine interaction with the real physical world, further alienating individuals from their physical selves. Example of the character named Ma who detached herself from the real world to the virtual reality world by using Super deluxe video couch. Even the basic physical needs are fulfilled with the help of recycling and bio feed in processor.

2. Commodification of the Body

In the play, the human body becomes a commodity, with its functions and organs being leased or sold to the highest bidder. This reflects the way capitalist

systems reduce human beings to mere objects or resources for profit. This is reflected when Virgil says, “We support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves”. While the body itself is the site of this transaction, AI plays a role in facilitating and even controlling the commodification process. For instance, the use of technology like Contact module to control, and exploit the body’s functions represents treatment of it like a machine that can be manipulated.

3. Technology and Surveillance

AI in *Harvest* is not just about automation, but also about surveillance. The rich individuals who rent the bodies of the impoverished often monitored via AI-based surveillance systems. These systems not only track bodily functions but also ensure that the people renting out their bodies are adhering to certain protocols. In this way, AI is instrumental in maintaining a power imbalance, where the marginalized individuals are reduced to their physical utility and are under constant surveillance. Even the food and usage of products are replaced according to the recipient’s wish. Control exerted by the technology is in slow degrees that make up the characters to obey or to die in poverty. “To remain employed we have to keep ourselves exactly as they tell us”, said by Om reflects this notion.

4. Dehumanization and the Role of Technology

The play examines how technology can dehumanize people. While AI in *Harvest* is not depicted as autonomous or sentient, it is a tool used by those in power to control and exploit the vulnerable. The characters are subjected to the manipulations of technology, which distorts their identity and autonomy. The characters of the play were forced to strip off the last pounce of emotions and feelings, which made humans in the first place. It is seen in Om’s words where he complains generosity action of sharing their toilet with others who helped them in the first place. “It’s like Ginni says-the curse of the Donor world is sentimentality”. This dehumanization questions the use of bioethics and human rights.

5. AI and the Loss of Autonomy

One of the most poignant aspects of the intersection between AI and body politics in *Harvest* is the loss of individual autonomy. The play suggests that when technology (like AI) takes over the management of the body, human beings lose control over their own lives. The use of technology to mediate bodily functions and interactions means that the body is no longer a site of personal choice or sovereignty but becomes a subject of manipulation by the wealthy elite and technological systems. Thus, use of technology—whether AI or otherwise—amplifies the exploitation of vulnerable bodies.

Reclaiming Agency of Body:

The only reclaiming agency who showed resilience throughout the play is Jaya. She voiced out her desires, her thoughts through her words as well as through the actions. Though Jeetu too tried his best to regain his agency, he miserably failed in the hands of technology. When he sees the virtual image of Ginni’s body and her place, he voluntarily surrendered himself to her. He was willing to give away his organ just to see the Utopian world once he wished to see. But it was at his personal cost. He lost his life in the end. But Jaya strived till the end. Her first step against the body politics played by AI is making Virgil, the virtual character to call her Jaya and not Zhaya. Finally, when she was forced to the corner by the phantom she presumed, she valiantly asserted her agency by making her own choice. She broke free off the control of technology and die in the absence of reality. Her words as follows profess a war against the oppressing forces, “But I’ll die knowing that you, who live only to win have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman”

III.CONCLUSION

In *Harvest*, the intersection of AI and body politics illustrates the potential for technology to not only reshape the way we interact with our bodies but also

to reinforce social hierarchies. The use of AI in the play is not about enhancing human capability, but about stripping individuals of their autonomy, reducing them to mere instruments for others' pleasure or profit. Through this intersection, Padmanabhan critiques the growing commodification of the human body, the dehumanization facilitated by technology, and the dangers of economic inequality and technological surveillance. Thus, play ultimately raises important ethical questions about the ways in which AI, body politics, and economic systems intersect, urging us to reflect on the future implications of these developments.

intelligence/#:~:text=An%20artificial%20system%20developed%20in%20computer%20software%2C%20physical,perception%2C%20cognition%2C%20planning%2C%20learning%2C%20communication%2C%20or%20physical%20action.

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