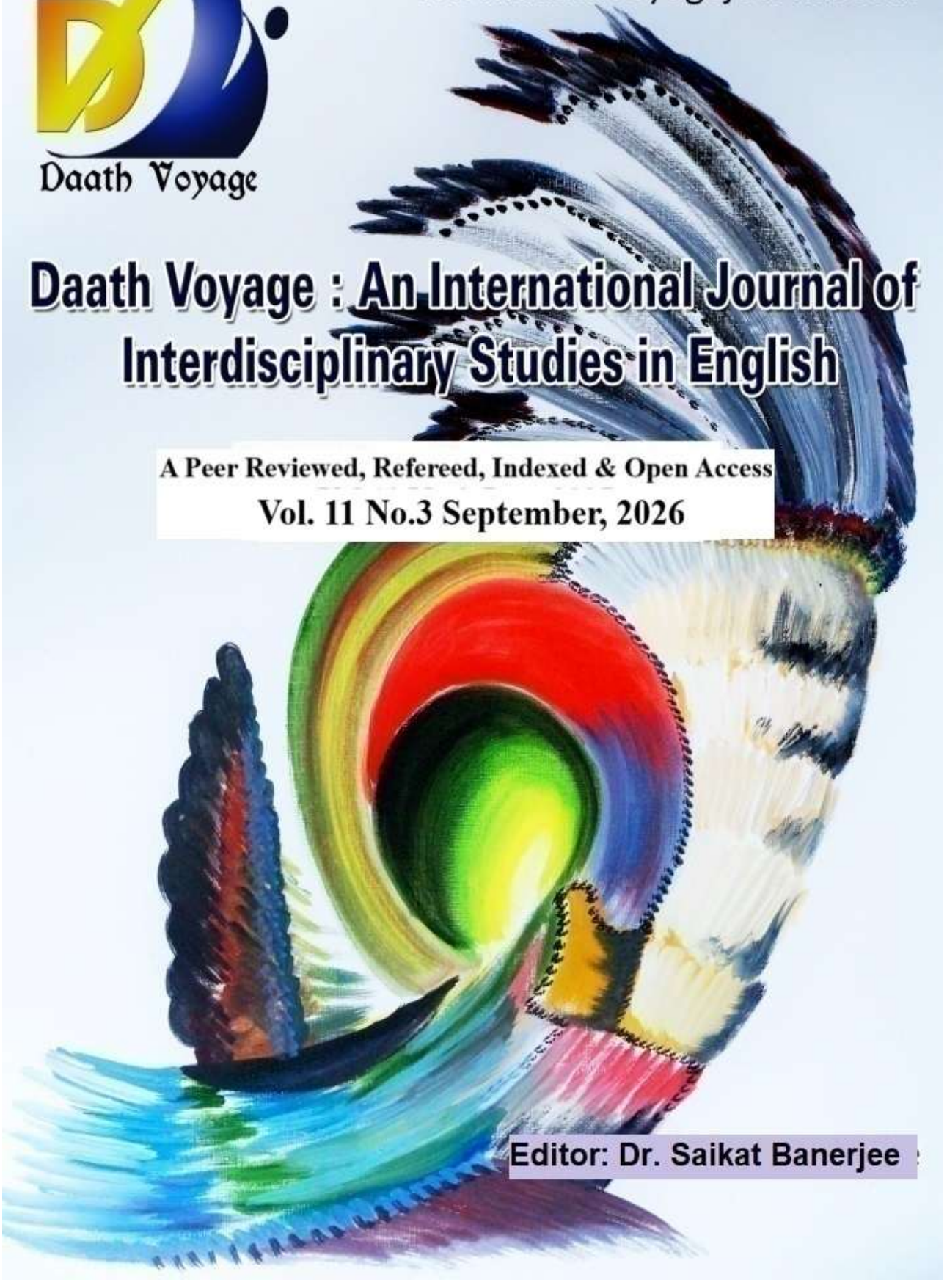
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Living to Be Harvested: Biopolitics and Bodily Extraction in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*

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Abstract: This paper reads Manjula Padmanabhan's Harvest (1997) not merely as dystopian allegory of organ trafficking and globalisation, but as a theatrically precise analysis of what this paper terms the bioeconomy of extraction. The global system by which the bodies of the economically dispossessed are rendered bioavailable for the consumption of the affluent. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, Michel Foucault's biopolitics, and Arjun Appadurai's theory of the global mediascape. The paper argues that the play's deployment of screens, surveillance, and remote control is not incidental to its political argument but constitutive of it. The theatrical form itself enacts the media logic the play critiques, implicating the audience in the very structures of asymmetric spectatorship the play stages.

Keywords: Necropolitics, bioeconomy, postcolonial drama, globalisation, body.

There is a stage direction near the beginning of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* that deserves more critical attention than it has received. When Om signs the contract with InterPlanta Services agreeing, in effect, to surrender his body and those of his family to the harvesting of their organs for transplant to wealthy recipients in the First World. The stage direction specifies that the transaction is sealed not with a handshake but with the press of a button. A flicker of a screen, a voice from a machine. The bodies being contracted are present; the contracting party is invisible, mediated, disembodied. The asymmetry is total and it is the play's central theatrical image. In the world of *Harvest*, some bodies are pure presence vulnerable, harvested, consumed while others are pure absence sovereign, technologically extended, essentially bodiless.

The framework of necropolitics and the bioeconomy, developed from the work of Michel Foucault and extended, revised, and radicalised by Achille Mbembe. To this Arjun Appadurai's theory of the global mediascape, his account of how global media flows constitutes imaginaries of desire, aspiration, and

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consumption that redistribute subjectivity along lines of global inequality. As a means of reading the play's specific theatrical preoccupation with screens, surveillance, and remote control. Together, these frameworks allows one to see *Harvest* not merely as an allegory of globalisation but as a precise, theatrically sophisticated analysis of what is caledl the *bioeconomy of extraction*. The global system by which certain bodies those produced as economically surplus by the logic of global capital are rendered available as biological raw material for the maintenance and extension of other bodies that global capital has produced as economically sovereign.

Michel Foucault's concept of biopower the modern state's administration of populations through the management of life, health, reproduction, and death is the necessary starting point for any analysis of *Harvest*'s political economy. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1976) and the lectures of *Society Must Be Defended* (1975–76), Foucault describes how modern power operates not primarily through the sovereign's right to kill but through the administration and optimisation of life. Populations are measured, managed, and regulated in the interest of their collective health and productivity. This is a power that speaks in the language of care, medicine, and development but it is power nonetheless, and it determines, ultimately, who has access to life-sustaining resources and who does not.

Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, extends and critiques Foucault's framework by asking a question that Foucault's focus tended to occlude: what does biopower look like in the colony, or in the postcolony? For Mbembe, the political-economic logic of colonialism and its continuation in contemporary global capitalismism not primarily the administration of life but the administration of *death*. The determination of who may be exposed to death, what Mbembe calls the "death-worlds" to which surplus populations are consigned. "The ultimate expression of sovereignty," Mbembe writes, "resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 11). In the necropolitical framework, the distinction between the living and the dead is not absolute but is a function of political and economic power. Wherein certain populations are allowed, even compelled, to exist in a zone of "living death" alive but not fully alive, available to be consumed by processes that benefit others.[1]

[1] The distinction between biopower and necropower is crucial here. Foucault's biopower, as elaborated in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1976) and the lectures collected in *Society Must Be Defended* (1975–76), describes the modern state's management of populations through the administration of life. Mbembe's necropolitics, by contrast, describes the exercise of power as the determination of who may live and who must die. In *Harvest*, both logics operate simultaneously: Om's body is kept alive (biopower) precisely so that it may be systematically harvested to the point of death (necropower), making the play a remarkably precise theatrical staging of the transition between these two regimes.

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This concept of living death, the body maintained at the minimum threshold of biological viability so that its resources can be continuously extracted. Om and his family are not simply poor; they are poor in the specific mode that the global bioeconomy requires. They are bioavailable, their bodies are intact enough to be harvested, their desperation sufficient to make them sign. Their economic position ensuring that no protective structure legal, social, or political stands between their bodies and InterPlanta's extraction apparatus.[2]

Arjun Appadurai's theory of the global mediascape, developed in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996). Appadurai identifies five "scapes" flows of people, technology, finance, media, and ideology that constitute the disjunctive, uneven terrain of global culture. The mediascape is of particular interest here. It is the global flow of images, narratives, and desires produced by electronic media, and it is, for Appadurai, a constitutive force in the production of subjectivity under globalisation. The poor of the Global South do not simply suffer the economic effects of globalisation; they also inhabit, through television and media, the *imaginaries* of global affluence. They see daily, images of the lives that global capital has made possible for some and foreclosed for others. This is not an innocent exposure: it produces desires that cannot be satisfied within the existing economic order and that therefore make people vulnerable to the promises and the contracts of entities like InterPlanta.

The most immediately striking feature of *Harvest*'s theatrical architecture is its use of the screen. VIRGIL, the play's First World "receiver" the entity who has purchased the harvesting rights to Om's family is never present on stage in the conventional sense. He (or it — the play is deliberately ambiguous about VIRGIL's ontological status) communicates exclusively through a television screen installed in Om's home. This screen is not a neutral communication device. It is a technology of surveillance, of remote control, and of the spectacular staging of power. Through it, VIRGIL watches Om's family; through it, VIRGIL issues instructions, rewards, and punishments; through it; VIRGIL constitutes himself as a kind of god omniscient, omnipresent, essentially disembodied. In relation to the embodied, vulnerable, visible family on the other side[3].

[2] The concept of the "organ as commodity" has been extensively theorised in medical sociology and bioethics. See Lawrence Cohen's ethnographic study "Where It Hurts: Indian Material for an Ethics of Organ Transplantation" (Daedalus, 1999) for an account of how organ markets in India are structured by caste, gender, and economic desperation, and how the bodies of the poor are rendered into what Cohen calls "bioavailable" matter.

[3] Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, introduced in "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), is also relevant to the screen's function in the play. The screen mediates between OM's biologically vulnerable body and VIRGIL's technologically sovereign one, suggesting that the post-human body is always already a product of its technological interfaces. Padmanabhan's theatrical use of the screen as a stage device anticipates Haraway's later work on the "contact zone" between human bodies and technological systems.

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This is, in theatrical terms, a remarkably sophisticated staging of the necropolitical contact zone.[4] The play's stage space is divided, asymmetrically, between two regimes of presence. The full bodily, vulnerable presence of Om's family in their Mumbai slum, and the mediated, technological, sovereign presence of VIRGIL on his screen. The asymmetry is not accidental; it is the play's central argument made spatial and theatrical. In the necropolitical economy that *Harvest* stages, embodiment is not a condition of power but a condition of vulnerability. To have a body a real, biological, harvestable body is to be on the wrong side of the screen. Sovereignty, in this world, belongs to those who have transcended or technologically extended their bodies to the point where they can administer other bodies from a safe, mediated distance.

Appadurai's mediascape theory illuminates the screen's second function in the play. The television that VIRGIL uses to surveil and control Om's family is the same type of object the same technology that has delivered to Om and his family the images of First World affluence that makes them susceptible to InterPlanta's offer in the first place. Padmanabhan is precise about this, OM's mother, Ma, initially resists the contract until she sees, on VIRGIL's screen, images of the comfortable life that compliance will provide. The mediascape the global flow of images of consumption, comfort, and desire is not separate from the bioeconomic system of extraction. It is its ideological apparatus. The screen shows life that they cannot have, is also the screen through which the body is monitored for its harvesting potential. The desire the mediascape produces is, in *Harvest*, the mechanism by which bodies are rendered bioavailable.

The play's two male figures Om and his brother Jeetu represent, within the bioeconomic logic of *Harvest*, two different modalities of bodily availability. Om is the primary "donor", it is his body that has been contracted to InterPlanta, and it is for his biological preservation his nutrition, his comfort, his freedom from stress that the contract's benefits are provided. He is, in the most literal sense, being maintained, kept at optimal biological health so that his organs, when harvested, will be in the best possible condition. Jeetu, by contrast, is initially outside the contract a marginal figure, a sex worker, living by the sale of his body in the most immediate sense. His eventual incorporation into the InterPlanta system (his

[4] The Contact Zone, as Mary Louise Pratt defines it in Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (1992), is "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." Padmanabhan's stage space functions as such a contact zone: the OM household and VIRGIL's remote control centre are geographically separated but technologically connected, and their relation is constituted entirely by coercion and radical inequality.

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eyes are coveted as a separate harvesting prize) reveals the fractal quality of the bioeconomy. There is always another body part, another biological resource, to be identified, valued, and extracted.

The treatment of Om within the contract is a textbook illustration of Foucauldian biopower. His body is administered, optimised, and maintained in the interest of its future harvest. The food provided by InterPlanta is calibrated not to Om's preferences or his hunger but to the nutritional requirements of viable transplant organs. His movements are monitored. His stress levels are managed. He is, in the most clinical sense, being farmed. And yet, and this is the play's most disturbing insight, Om does not experience this farming as oppression but as care. The InterPlanta regime with its nutritious food, its medical attention, its screen entertainments is experienced by Om as a form of provision, perhaps the first genuine provision his life has offered. This is what makes the play's political critique so unsettling. The bioeconomy of extraction does not need to conceal itself as violence because it presents itself, and is experienced, as generosity.

It is Jaya, Om's wife, who most clearly perceives the nature of the transaction from the beginning. Her initial refusal to consent, her ongoing discomfort with the surveillance apparatus, her resistance to the replacement female figures that InterPlanta deploys to manage Jeetu's compliance these responses are not simply moral squeamishness. They represent a clear-eyed perception of what the contract actually entails; not a transaction between equals, not a gift, but a systematic, technologically mediated reduction of her family to their biological components. Jaya's perception, however, cannot halt the process. She is herself incorporated into the system monitored, managed, and subject to its rewards and punishments and her clarity of vision does not translate into effective agency. This, too, is a precise staging of necropolitical logic: in the bio economy of extraction, understanding your situation does not give you the power to change it.

The moment that crystallises the play's necropolitical logic most sharply is Jeetu's decision to destroy his own eyes rather than surrender them to InterPlanta's harvesting apparatus. This act self-mutilation as resistance is the limit case of what agency looks like for the bioeconomically dispossessed. Unable to withdraw from the system (the contract cannot be cancelled; the surveillance is total), unable to resist it through collective action (there is no community, no union, no political structure available to OM's family), Jeetu can only resist by making his body unusable. By destroying the very organs that the system values. This is not heroism in any conventional sense. It is the logic of the hunted animal that gnaws off its own leg to escape the trap a resistance that is also a self-destruction, that achieves freedom only by

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foreclosing future possibility. Mbembe's necropolitical framework is again illuminating here, in the death-world; the only sovereignty available to the dispossessed may be the sovereignty over their own death or self-destruction.

One of the most significant and under analysed dimensions of *Harvest* is the relationship between its theatrical form and its political argument. The play is not simply *about* surveillance, the screen, and the spectacular staging of bodily vulnerability. It enacts these things in its own theatrical apparatus. The audience who watches *Harvest* is, in a structural sense, in the position of VIRGIL. They observe OM's family from a safe, distanced position, through the mediating apparatus of theatrical representation. The stage is, in this reading, another screen another technology of safe, privileged observation of bodies that are less protected than our own.

Padmanabhan seems aware of this structural complicity. The play does not offer its audience the consolation of a clearly positioned moral stance from which to observe and judge. It refuses the comfortable separation between the observer and the observed, the consumer and the consumed. The audience's desire to watch their subscription to the theatrical event is, in the play's self-reflexive logic, not entirely unlike the First World "receiver's" subscription to the body of the Third World donor. Both involve the payment of a fee for the privilege of observation; both involve a radical asymmetry of vulnerability between the observed and the observer. This is not to say that going to the theatre is equivalent to commissioning organ harvesting the analogy is structural, not moral but Padmanabhan uses it to disturb the audience's comfortable assumption of ethical spectatorship.

The play's use of the "Contact Module" the technological apparatus through which VIRGIL controls OM's domestic environment is another instance of form serving argument. The Contact Module is, literally, a remote-control device; it allows VIRGIL to adjust the temperature, the lighting, the food supply, and the entertainment available in OM's home. It is a staging of what we might call infrastructure as sovereignty. The capacity to control the material conditions of another's life from a distance, without presence, without accountability, and without the possibility of negotiation. The technological infrastructure of the global economy communication networks, financial systems, and supply chains functions in precisely this way, determining the material conditions of life in the Global South from the sovereign remoteness of the Global North. Padmanabhan gives this abstract structure a theatrical body; the Contact Module is the stage property that makes visible what is normally invisible.

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Written in 1997, *Harvest* has proven to be one of the most prescient works in the contemporary postcolonial dramatic canon. The quarter-century since its composition has seen not only the continued expansion of global organ trafficking networks but the emergence of new bioeconomic extraction regimes that the play's framework anticipates with remarkable clarity. The global clinical trial industry, which tests pharmaceutical products on bodies in the Global South before they are approved for use in the Global North. The surrogacy industry, which rents the reproductive bodies of poor women in developing countries to wealthy couples in developed ones; the data economy, which extracts and monetises the behavioural and biological data of populations who often have no understanding of the transaction. In all of these industries, the structural logic that *Harvest* stages is reproduced. Bodies that are bioavailable, that lack the legal and political protections available to more economically privileged bodies, are rendered into resources for the maintenance and enhancement of bodies that the global economy has endowed with sovereignty.

What *Harvest* understood in 1997 and what makes it more rather than less relevant today is that this system does not operate through simple coercion alone. Om signs the contract. Jeetu accepts the arrangements provided for his compliance. Ma is won over by the images of comfort and security that the screen provides. The bioeconomy of extraction is sustained, in large part, by the genuine desires of those it exploits: desires for security, for food, for the small dignities that poverty denies. This is the most troubling dimension of Mbembe's necropolitical analysis as Padmanabhan stages it. The system is self-reproducing not because it is irresistible but because it offers, to those it will eventually consume, the only forms of care and provision that the existing order makes available to them. To refuse InterPlanta is not to find an alternative; it is simply to remain in the death-world without the illusory comfort of a screen.

The frameworks of necropolitics, biopolitics, and the mediascape are powerful analytical tools, but they carry a risk that is intrinsic to theoretical abstraction: the risk of rendering their subjects. The bodies they analyse as mere instances of a structural logic, as illustrations of a system rather than as lives. This is a risk that *Harvest* does not take, and it is, finally, the most important thing to say about what Padmanabhan's theatrical art accomplishes that the theory alone cannot.

Theatre is an art of embodied presence. Whatever else *Harvest* does however sophisticated its theoretical argument, however precise its analysis of necropolitical and bioeconomic systems. It does these things through bodies on a stage; the body of the actor playing Om, growing visibly weaker as the play progresses.

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The body of the actor playing Jaya, physically constrained by the surveillance apparatus; the body of Jeetu, performing the act of self-destruction that is the play's most shattering theatrical image. These bodies are not symbols. They are in the specific ontology of theatrical performance real bodies, present before an audience, enacting a vulnerability that is both fictional and, in its theatrical instantiation, genuine. The audience witnesses not the idea of bodily exploitation but something that, in the shared space of the theatre, feels uncomfortably close to the thing itself.

Harvest not just an important political text but an important theatrical work. It understands that the argument against the bioeconomy of extraction cannot be made purely at the level of analysis. It must be felt, witnessed, embodied. The theory tells us that certain bodies are rendered necropolitically available by the global economic order. The theatre makes us sit with a particular body Om's body, Jaya's body, Jeetu's body and watch what that rendering looks like, at the scale of a single family, in a single room, on a single stage. In doing so, *Harvest* insists on what the bioeconomy systematically denies that these are not resources. They are people. And their lives however the global order has valued, priced, and contracted them are not for sale.

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