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## HARVESTING DYSTOPIAS

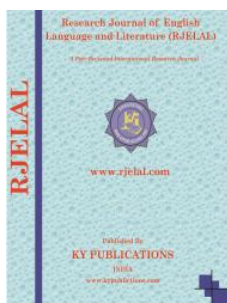
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### ABSTRACT

Dystopian literature generally have a futuristic setting with an obnoxious world order devoid of love, happiness and satisfaction. Scepticism permeates in and through the characters and the very mettle of the society is put to test. *Harvest* explores the complex relationship between developing and developed countries. Om, Ma, and Jeetu submits downright to the subjugative claws of the first world countries preying on the despair, hopelessness and poverty of the third world order, the only voice of resistance being Jaya. She fights against the unimaginably vile, colonizing, dystopic oppression and emerges victorious. The play indicates a point of time where developed countries work in a calculated fashion to blot out the distinct identities and heritage of the developing countries, where humans of the donor countries will be merely objects of exploitation and entertainment.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, futuristic, power, identity.

Dystopia offers 'a very unpleasant, imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination'. The origins of dystopian fiction are deeply rooted in utopian fiction. It emerged as a reaction to the utopian literary tradition wherein world is a 'perfect commonwealth' – an ideal place which guarantees happiness.

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

### Characteristics of a dystopian society

- There is breakdown of democracy as the totalitarian authority clench the society.
- People live in reverence/ absolute ignorance/ fear.
- Organized religion is overthrown and is replaced by propagandas.
- Information, independent thought and freedom are restricted.
- Distrust and suspicion penetrate its inhabitants.
- Aberration or dissent towards the established rule of law is severely censured.
- Rigorous control with perennial conformity as the result.
- Constant surveillance.

- Human mind controlled by an omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent entity.
- Themes of voluntary submission, genetic manipulation, and forbiddance of books, intellectual thought.
- Supervision over sexuality.
- Technology as a tool of oppression.

ManjulaPadmanabhan's *Harvest* which won the inaugural Onassis prize for theatre is a futuristic play with a world depicted as controlled by the developed countries. Setting of the play is a claustrophobic one room flat in Bombay where Om the bread winner of the family has been laid off from his job as a clerk. To provide sustenance to his family and to avoid disgrace associated with unemployment, Om procures a job. He, the third world donor signs the Faustian pact with the first world receiver to sell his organs. Once selected the donor will have to slavishly adhere to the rules and norms, whims and fancies of the receiver. Their life will be monitored closely and to remain employed they will have to keep themselves exactly as they tell.

Believing Inter Planta Service needed unmarried men, Om conceals the fact that he is already married that Jaya is his wife. Jaya has to be his 'sister' to secure the job and his brother Jeetu, her husband. They put up one act after the other believing that they have fooled the all-pervasive eyes of the employer.

The material comforts which the Prakash family could only dream of are provided by the employer to hook donors into unquestionable subservience. Little do they realise that they are being fattened up for slaughter. Om's statement about the selection process foreshadows the fate. '...we could only stand one behind the other-like goats at the slaughterhouse' (10).

The new authority takes over the most private, personal and intimate aspects of their life. The contact module operates as a panopticon, a tool for surveillance. Hanging from the ceiling is a white faceted globe, at least three feet in diameter. It looks like a Japanese lantern. The polygon stirs alight

when the guard points a remote at it. Random facets light up. It is through the module that Ginny- a computer animated dream hegemonies their world.

The receiver is a man named Virgil who appear in the guise of Ginny 'the blonde and white-skinned epitome of an American-style youth goddess' (3) with a sweet and sexy voice. She is beautiful in a clear-eyed, unequivocal manner, exuding a youthful innocence and radiant purity. A bait deliberately placed by the predator to entice his prey.

Not only Om but also his family becomes mere instrument in the hands of the Inter Planta Service. The kitchen is cleared swabbed and the utensils replaced with a cooking device and bottles full of multi-coloured pellets. Food is referred as 'fuel' (15) and are supposed to consume only that which is provided by the guards. Om, Ma and Jaya are considered machines with fuel to sustain them. They are bereft of their individual choice of food as well as life.

The claustrophobic single room flat two months later transforms into a sleek residence, with gleaming surfaces, chrome steel and glass. Furniture, gadgets - TVset, computer terminal, minigym, an air-conditioner, Japanese style dining table, cubicles containing the bathroom and toilet, adorn the room. The pact enables them to 'enjoy a First World standard of living and lifestyle - they will be clean, well-fed, entertained and wealthy- until such time as his receiver demands Om's organs for his own survival'.

The intrusion on the private life reaches a point wherein Ginny wants them to keep Om, her scapegoat, 'to smile all through the day' (40). Because if Om's smiling it means his body is smiling and if his body is smiling it means his organs are smiling. 'And that's the kind of organs that'll survive a transplant best, smiling organs!' (41)

The dignity of human life is reduced to mere puppetry when Ginny considers watching over Om and his family as highly entertaining. 'Better than T.V. Better than CyberNet. Coz this is Real Life (43)'

Ma becomes slave of the T.V to the extent that she orders 'Super deluxe Video Couch model XL 5000, a tomb like structure 'reminiscent of Tutankhamen's sarcophagus, encrusted with electronic dials and circuitry in the place of jewels' (85). The fully self-sufficient unit provides 750 channels from all over the world and comes with a nourishment panel, hydration filter, breathing mask, a full-recycling and bio-feed-in processor so that there will be 'no further need of the outside world from now till she chooses to delink' (88). Ma is helped into the Couch and the agents close the lid. She chooses the world of hyper-reality 'way to an experience of ultimate bliss-' (87) and detaches herself totally from the outside world.

As it's time to go with the guards for 'donation' Om's breakdown is complete. He reminds us of Dr. Faustus in his pleading. 'Another month-another week, another day, even' (53) But Jeetu is taken away by the guards instead of Om. Jeetu's eyes are removed and replaced 'with a contraption that projects Ginny's sexy image directly into his brain. Although Jeetu had been the most critical of the organ donation schemes, now all he can see is Ginny's sexy image; he is seduced and this virtual relationship leads him to finally 'donate' his entire body'.

Jeetu's mind is extracted from the body, though he doesn't have a body 'He has a - casing' (94) in Virgil's words. His mind still fed on seductive images of Ginny. "He sees what he wants to see. He lives what he wants to live' (94) without a body.

Jeetu was willing to trade his body for illusions of Ginny which he thought real and Virgil was willing to buy. Virgil was old and sick until he got Jeetu's young body and it is his 'fourth body in fifty years' (96). Though Om enlisted for the job, he was only a part of the job not the real job. They want childbearing women - Jaya is the real job.

Virgil: We look for young men's bodies to live in and young women's bodies in which to sow their children -

Jaya: Why! Don't you have your own?

Virgil: We...lost the art of having children.

Jaya: How can that be?

Virgil: We began to live longer and longer. And healthier each generation. And more demanding - soon there was competition between one generation and the next - old against young, parent against child. (*shrugs*) We older ones had the advantage of experience. We prevailed. But our victory was bitter. We secured Paradise - at the cost of birds and flowers, bees and snakes! We were determined to make our amends. So we designed this programme. In exchange for the life support we offer poorer sections of the world, we gain fresh bodies for ourselves. (96)

The guards can deliver an implant - a device which makes the child possible. But Jaya is unwilling to succumb to the intimidating plans of Virgil. She wants Virgil to travel to her as she is not inclined to believe a phantom, an illusion named Virgil. She knows that Virgil will never risk his life to meet her in real. He can only provide 'make-believe travels' and 'tricking comforts' (99). Virgil's strategy to make the guards force open the door is defeated when Jaya says she's holding a piece of glass against her throat and she'd take her life if the door is forced open.

Jaya: What do I care about my life? You've shown me that it's not really mine any more. It's your's. I'm not willing to caretakemy body for *your* sake! The only thing I have left which is still mine is my death. My death and my pride - (101)

Jaya discovers a new definition for winning. 'Winning by losing. I win if you lose' (100).

Prakash household represents a microcosm of the larger world dystopic chaos. Jeetu had ideals, freedom, pride before he surrendered to a tempting hallucination.

Om signed up for this programme because he lost his job and 'nobody needs clerk anymore!' (68). There are no new jobs, the factories are all closing. He joined not out of his free will but 'there wasn't anything left to do.... There was nothing *left* for people like us' (68). He didn't even choose this job - he stood in the queue and was chosen. 'And if I hadn't got this one, there would have been other queues' (68). He wanted to secure a steady income

for the family but falls prey of the system to the extent 'I live only for your benefit' (42).

Ma, pragmatic and practical initially stands for the individual who is immersed in the world of consumerism and illusion so much so that she doesn't want to exist. She would rather prefer to live in a virtual world and permits herself to be entombed in a Video Couch. The crux of enlisting in the programme was to break free from the confinements of poverty and to improve the standard of living but they lose everything even their lives.

ManjulaPadmanabhan draws the picture of a world devoid of spiritual values indulged in the desire to live beyond their means even at the cost of selling their organs. The subtle black comedy juxtaposes the macabre with humour which underscores the futility of human life. The humour often underlying the comedy is dystopic and gruesome.

Economic benefits and material gains are given priority over family relations. The first world countries willing to shower its paltry riches and the third world countries greedily awaiting them underlines how dehumanized the world has become. The rich has monopoly over the poor, exploiting the poverty. They dictates the norms and rules creating a dystopic havoc on the lives of the peripheral. Is there a way out of this labyrinth?

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