

A Study of Contemporary Life Concerns and Contradictions in the Work of Manjula Padmanabhan

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Abstract: *In changing times, the delineation of new life values constantly shifts with the changing interests and desires of the public. This change expresses the contradictions of contemporary life contexts, depicting and describing the emotions of the human mind over time. This thinking, giving expression to the new expectations of society, portrays the contemporary life group, describing their diverse emotions and desires. This description becomes a time-relevant standard, serving as a guide for future generations and a subject of study. The present paper seeks to explore how recurring themes-such as the commodification of the body, alienation in urban life, technological intrusion, and gendered oppression-serve as vehicles for social critique. By examining these themes, the research aims to uncover the ways in which Padmanabhan uses speculative and dystopian elements to question moral and political assumptions embedded in postcolonial and globalized realities.*

Keywords: Study, Contemporary, concerns, contradictions, works, emotional, depiction, thinking, visible etc

I. INTRODUCTION

Manjula Padmanabhan was born in 1953 in Delhi, India, into a well-educated, cosmopolitan family. Her father was a diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service, which meant she spent much of her childhood and adolescence living abroad in countries such as Sweden, Pakistan, Thailand, and Germany. This international upbringing gave her early exposure to diverse cultures, languages, and social systems, but it also produced a sense of rootlessness and cultural displacement — an experience that would later become a defining undercurrent in her writing.

Padmanabhan was educated both in India and overseas. She studied at Elphinstone College, Mumbai, and began her career as a cartoonist, illustrator, and journalist before turning to fiction and drama. Her first major recognition came with her play *Harvest* (1997), which won the Onassis Prize for Theatre. In addition to writing plays and fiction, she has also illustrated children's books and contributed political and satirical cartoons to Indian newspapers such as *The Pioneer* and *The Sunday Observer*. Her multifaceted background — part artist, part social observer, and part global citizen — deeply informs her creative voice, which blends visual imagination, sharp social commentary, and ethical inquiry.

Padmanabhan's itinerant childhood gave her a dual consciousness — she saw India from both within and without. This awareness of cultural contrasts appears throughout her writing. In *Getting There* (2000), for instance, the protagonist's journey abroad mirrors the author's own struggles with belonging and identity in foreign spaces. Her characters often exist between worlds — modern yet alienated, rooted yet restless — reflecting her own experiences as part of an educated Indian diaspora. The purpose of this research is to undertake a thematic study of selected works by Manjula Padmanabhan in order to analyze how her writing reflects the anxieties and contradictions of contemporary existence.

Growing up across borders cultivated in her a critical distance from any one culture. This detachment sharpens her satirical edge — she is able to scrutinize Indian society's contradictions (patriarchy, class prejudice, moral hypocrisy) with both affection and irony. Her early exposure to Western liberal ideals also helps her critique the commodification and exploitation that globalization brings to postcolonial societies, as vividly portrayed in *Harvest*.



Padmanabhan's international upbringing and familiarity with the developed world's technological advancements shaped her fascination with science fiction and dystopian futures — genres relatively rare in Indian English literature. Having witnessed both the privilege of technological societies and the inequalities of developing nations, she uses speculative fiction to critique global capitalism and ethical decay. Her early global experiences thus translate into a transnational imagination in her writing.

Padmanabhan's background as an illustrator and cartoonist shapes her writing style: concise, visually detailed, and darkly humorous. Her early training in visual storytelling influences her stage directions in plays and her vivid world-building in fiction. The use of stark imagery and irony in *Harvest* or *Three Virgins and Other Stories* reflects her dual talent for visual and verbal expression.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997) is a complexly meditated play which attempts to address the problems and the worries of the Third World. This once colonized lands still remain politically, economically, and culturally baffled in the face of rapidly changing world. Most of the post-colonial countries, soon after their political independence, realized that their long cherished dream of a self-reliant, sovereign state will always remain a dream as they cannot easily shake off the exploitative system entrenched in their land. Padmanabhan's *Harvest*, set in a cramped single room tenement in futuristic Mumbai, delineates the predatory potential of the capitalist and the neo-imperialistic First World which will reach its apex in the immediate future. Writing the play in 1997 she imagined of a bleak Mumbai in the 2010 which is suffering in the hands of untraceable enemies.

If one reads the present critically, s/he could take cognizance of Padmanabhan's imagined futures' harrowing similarity with the society in which we are living today. Even after the political independence, multifarious forms of domination, control, and subjectivity prevailed in the former colonies and all these hugely contributed to the confused socio-political system of the newly independent land. *Harvest* portrays a dystopian India where unemployment and its all time companion poverty flourish. Bereft of the revolutionary spirit they had when agitating against the colonizers, the people in the newly 'independent' country are lethargic, escapist, and dejected. As the play begins by dropping the audience into the midst of the problems and privations of Om Prakash's family, the dramatist effectively conveys the dire tone of the play in a concise fashion. The plot gets into gear by revealing Om's Faustian pact with the InterPlanta Services, which works as an agent for the European buyer Ginni, to trade unspecified parts of his body. InterPlanta Services' eventual 'elevation' of the living standards of Om's family resulted in the complete surrender of the family's privacy, integrity and whatever they held dear. Ginni, the buyer-cum-employer of Om, trespasses into his private life via technology and exercises her power over him in the forms discipline, care, control and so on.

These techniques and modes of invasion invite a Foucauldian reading of the situation since Foucault has written so meditatively and scrupulously about the pervasive power relations that cover the modalities mentioned above. The way the Ginni trespasses into and 'takes care of' the family has close similitude with Foucauldian conception of the sovereign power which "was exercised over bodies through a system of surveillance and via a grid or network of material coercions which effected an efficient and controlled increase (minimum expenditure, maximum return) in the utility of the subjected body" (Smart 74).

The present level of globalization discourse still reflects the original discussion, where one side expresses worry that the world is on the verge of collapse owing to its limited resources, environmental issues, inequality, and economic crises. There is a conviction, on the other hand, that globalization and data innovation are bringing about a one-of-a-kind period of opportunity and information sharing that has never been witnessed before in the history of humanity. There is little question that the depiction of Padmanabhan in her play *Harvest* does not align with this point of view. As a result of the fact that it makes people feel conflicted feelings, globalization is a huge difficulty in the present day.

Lights out (1986) appeared on stage at Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai 1986 and published in a collection named *Body Blows-Women, Violence and Survival-Three Plays* (2002). It is the three scenes play set in Mumbai. It depicts different dimensions of domestic violence and the sexual assault in a male dominated society. Padmanabhan has addressed this issue of subordinate position to women and several other discriminations in the society. The play though not particularly but specifically addresses this miserable plight of women in India and the way men look at them as secondary human being. All the three women in the play are shown passive. They are exploited either physically or mentally in the society or in their own houses by their family members. This tragic incident of rape is witnessed at a



distance by the middle-class characters who are divided on their opinions of either to inform the police or not. They are merely participants of this violent act. More disturbing is the reaction of society and their mentality of non-interference even in a serious situation. It sheds light on a significant issue of right and wrong termed by Padmanabhan as 'natural morality'. According to her the real world is not an ideal place to everyone. Several people have unpleasant lives which naturally influence everyone. The play demarcates the differences in the views between opposite genders and focuses on the human consciousness, mentality, and the social reality in the modern time that is not much positive but very alarming. It questions the fundamental ideology of the human society and their purpose of social existence.

II. CONCLUSION

Manjula Padmanabhan has emerged as one of the most original voices in contemporary Indian English literature, known for her bold engagement with questions of technology, globalization gender, and ethics. Critical attention to her work has grown since her play *Harvest* (1997) won the prestigious Onassis Prize for Theatre. This research demonstrates that Manjula Padmanabhan's creative vision transcends mere futuristic fantasy; it becomes a critical mirror to the social, moral, and psychological conditions of modern life. This study reveals her enduring relevance as a writer who anticipates the ethical dilemmas of the twenty-first century and gives voice to the silent struggles of marginalized identities in a rapidly changing world.

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