



**Resistance as a form of Historical Need: Analyzing Manjula  
Padmanabhan's *Harvest***

**PRASANTH. P S**

Ph. D Research Scholar in English  
Kannur University, Kerala.

**Abstract:**

Society has always been divided into structures of power and powerlessness, dominant and dominated based on gender. The former has always suppressed the latter into silence. Pushed outside the margins of existence, the silenced section does lose its voice but awaits the opportunity to break free of the confines of silence and subjugation. The marginalized voice strives to make itself heard and be recognized and this attempt is the first step to resistance. Indian English Drama after 1990, was an intense form of presenting the intellectual and emotional and voice of the oppressed. Theatre began to take its shape even in the remotest part of India in the 90s, but there was a struggle with the issue of patriarchy. So liberation was needed in the field of Indian Theatre from the male captured vision. The emergence of democratic theatres in the rural areas of India with women actors was a significant change. Indian drama was unfortunately searching for the rare portrayal of powerful womanhood. The present paper is an attempt to overview the gradual but strong and profound voice of resistance shown in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*.

**Keywords:** Gender, power, existence, subjugation, marginalization, patriarchy, resistance.

Theatres spread all over India as one of the means of entertainment in the post independent India. Being a multi-cultural nation, India cannot be considered as a space for a unique conventional theatrical identity. One of the basic problems faced by many theatres of rural India in 1990s is its struggle with the issue of patriarchy. Jana Sanskriti, a largest rural theatre company of West Bengal, Kolkata has experienced this struggle in the 90s. Raju Srivastava in his book *Contemporary Indian Dramatists: Theatre and Films* expresses this situation which became a major reason behind the development of some thematic emergence on womanhood:

Topics like alcoholism, violence towards women, economic dependence, forced marriages, not giving girls a right to education are those which they work on quite often. They see the patriarchy, from a political and social perspective, as the root of the problem. Even though they do not define themselves as a feminist group, we can easily say that their approach and the



path they are following is a feminist one. In villages where they demonstrate their plays they actually change the dynamics of the village, while transforming both the spectators and their actors. (95)

Being an unconventional playwright of the 90s, Manjula Padmanabhan has created a thematic shift in Indian Drama from the age-old practice of marginalizing women characters to the modern practice of presenting them as the valuable role-models of resistance. The historical need of presenting female protagonists with reliable character growth has become a responsibility of this woman dramatist. *Harvest* (1998) is a futuristic play divided into three acts describing the power of resistance and survival. The play is set in Bombay and the year is 2010. Manjula describes this period as an era of significant technical advances. The plot revolves around the dangerous practice of organ selling. To present an atmosphere of anarchy, the playwright introduces a quite eerie stage setting when the curtain rises:

*The sound of inner city traffic: grimy, despairing, poison-fumed. It wells up before the curtains open, then cuts out to a background rumble as... the lights reveal a single-room accommodation in a tenement building. It is bare, but cluttered. In the foreground, stage left, is a board-bed across the tops of three steel trunks... (7)*

Om, the husband of Jaya, is the central male character of *Harvest*. When the play opens, he is seen returning after a funny, but terrible interview. Jaya is presented here as a lady with much expectation on the future of her husband and family. Om explains the eccentric process of his interview while Jaya listens to his words carefully and doubtfully. Her suspicious character is nothing but a replica of the conventional middle class Indian womanhood. On the stage, primarily Jaya is not rebellious; instead her portrayal is simple as a weak individual. The structure of Om's family has got nothing to do with the individuality of Jaya. Her mother-in-law is always quarrelsome and obsessive in her son's private matters. An alternative form of patriarchy is being established in the character of the mother. What India in the 90s witnessed was the same mode of oppression in all families, where women were not at all active in any main stream programmes. They are not the decision makers their family and society. Jaya shows her strength in the form of resistance for the first time to guard 1 when he with other fellow guards enter her house as instructed by the Interplanta service:

Jaya (to GUARD 1) Hi! What're you doing! (runs to OM) See- see what's happening! (back to GUARD 3, who gets ahead) Who said you can touch my things? (*tugs at his arm but he pays her no heed*) Hi! Stop that!..... ..You can't this! It's my house! No! Oh! Stop it, you monster, you beast! (*she tries to return items to the counter , but he is much faster than her*) Stop it, stop it, stop it! Don't you understand what I'm saying? Are you a mechine? Answer me! Oh! (*she abruptly turns it on herself and succumbs to a fit of stormy weeping*) (14-15)



The above dialogue suggests Jaya's sense of possession too. It's absolutely a new experience for the spectators of the 90s to watch a woman on the stage with her power of resistance. She believes and even feels that Om's house belongs to her and it's her privilege to resist all kinds of oppressions on her and her family. The plot of the play gradually develops with the character of Jaya. As she realizes that all of them are captured under the panoptical surveillance of the Interplanta service, she manages to be practical, telling a great lie to Ginni. Jaya convinces Ginni that she is Om's sister to avoid further complications in their communication. This lie also is a part of resistance because admitting Jaya's status as Om's wife may terminate her presence in the house. To resist, primarily one needs to ensure her presence at the space of the concerned anarchy. Jaya's protest is a political game where she makes her opposite parties mere fools. She stays with Om but denies that facts though all of them are being observed through the Contact Module.

Jaya's resistance is made tough with her philosophical attitudes in the second scene of the first act. When Om is perplexed with the interference of the Interplanta, it is Jaya who provide him much support and strength to face all the calamities related to it. Soon the spectator is shocked to see Jaya having an affair with Jeetu, the brother of Om. This kind of a cultural shock is inevitable on the stage to make the audience aware of the fact that an Indian woman is capable to go beyond the normal structure of the society. It is a severe blow on the patriarchal notions of female hood.

JAYA (*looking afraid but determined*) Jeetu? Are you there? Jeetu – it's me, Jaya!

*Quick steps, two shadows move away, one shadow materializes I front of JAYA.*

JEETU (*he does not look pleased to see her*) Who told you to come? This is not the right time – (30)

In the second act of the play, Jaya seems to be rather desperate and disappointed. She easily gets angry to Om and Jeetu in their casual talk. Her dilemma is derived out of a protest against the colonization and mechanization imposed upon her. All these steps in her character development show that a closely constructed consistent role of an Indian woman is acceptable on the stage of the 90s. The playwright should accept some of the social norms of each generation but she has to focus on the need of that generation too. Naturally, norms and needs wouldn't be the same in every society. So it becomes a herculean task for the playwright to present these two different extremes on a single canvas. Manjula has portrayed these two extremities; and in *Harvest* the extremities are slavery (norm) and resistance (need). But no playwright can draw a straight line from slavery to resistance expecting she can easily connect these two. All the emotions, feelings and expressions of Jaya are various landmarks which behave like roads to the needs from the norms.



In scene four, act three, Jaya is seen somewhat psychic and meanwhile courageous. She suffers helplessly being colonized by the inhuman techno-centric world which makes her almost psychic. The existence of Om Prakash is a confusing idea since he doesn't belong to his home or Interplanta service. It is Jaya who is ready to take every risk and responsibility of her family courageously at this point of time. A kind of diasporic identity shared by the family is expressed through the emotional detachment and monologues of the female protagonist. The industrialist, factory like attitude of the organ-selling agency distracts Jaya's inner realm. She feels herself alienated and frozen:

*JAYA flings the door open, leans out into the corridor – and freezes where she stands. The footsteps come to a halt. The shuffling continues. Om looks straight ahead, affecting un-concern. The shuffling draws close. JAYA stands aside, her face blank, watching as JEETU enters the room, shuffling slowly, his arms half-raised in front of him, being steered by GUARD 2, impassively. GUARD 1 enters as well. (69)*

The final act of the play is rich with the scenes of emotional imbalance. Such a sudden shift on the stage is actually constructed to identify the historical contextualization of the canonical ideas. The canon of patriarchy is being washed away from the stage as Manjula introduces a new mode of resistance through Jaya's perplexed psyche. As Susan Bennett points out:

...it is to be expected that those plays which gain admission into the now more inclusive canon will do so because of some performance of a filial relation either by the play, playwright, or the editor. It is virtually impossible, apparently, to avoid the drive to measure these new canonical stars against their male-authored counterparts or to resist their contextualization by the conditions we have historically identified as relevant to an understanding of drama and theatre. (52-53)

Jeetu and Om (the two male characters) are portrayed as powerless and completely colonized in the third act. Ginni wins in establishing her own cultural patterns in the house of Jaya. The competition is now between Jaya and Ginni. (the two female characters) Just opposite to the epic model rivalry of the male characters, (like Rama and Ravana or Krishna and Kamsa) here on the stage of the late 90s, the ideological fight between the colonizer woman and the colonized woman can be seen. Om's mother, who is absolutely a representation of the old generation, is also fully trapped by a mechanical device called the Super Deluxe Video Couch model XL 5000. To rest the colonizer, Jaya uses her body. When she is informed by Virgil to have an abnormal pregnancy, Jaya denies it. She doesn't like this blackmail:

JAYA: Stupid or not, if I lose my life, I win this game.

VIRGIL: You won't be alive to savour that victory-



JAYA: but I'll die knowing that you, who live only to win, will have lost to a poor, weak and helpless woman. And I'll get more pleasure out of that first moment of death than I've had in my entire life so far!

VIRGIL: Zhaya, this is childish-

JAYA: You still can't see me? (102)

The above question of Jaya is aimed at the whole Indian patriarchal society. Still, her resistance is not a complete one. When the curtain falls, audience can see her settling down comfortably in front of the television. "She looks happy and relaxed" (103)

When comparing the characters of Indumati (Ma) and Jaya, Manjula's pen speaks about a non-resisting old generation and a resisting young generation. She is trying to criticize a generation of woman lives under the exploitations of visual media in the 90s through Ma. The launch of Doordarsan as a national broadcaster had invited the negative attention of a section of women of India in 80s. Being a Delhi based writer, Manjula could easily get through the problems of that female generation who spoil their life in front of the television. The new generation womanhood is quite different; they have no time to spend as slaves of any system. They are brave enough to fight and survive in the techno-centric world.

When there were many regional theatre groups in different part of the country, the need for such a theatrical production giving importance to female resistance was inevitable. The colonial notion of pride as a poor man's fancy dress has been interrogated by the playwright. Female body is used in *Harvest* as a weapon of resistance, which was in all sense proved to be a historical need of a post-colonial nation like India.

### Bibliography

Padmanabhan, Manju. *Harvest*. New Delhi: Kali for women, 1998.

Srivastava, Raju. *Contemporary Indian Dramatists: Theatre and Films* expresses. New Delhi: Sublime, 2013

Bennet, Susan. "Theatrical History, Histeriography and Woman's Dramatic Writing". *Women, Theatre and Performance*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Martin, Carol (Ed). *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance on and beyond the Stage*. London: Routledge, 1996.

[Subramanyam](#), Lakshmi. *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Har-Anand, 2013.