



International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 4: 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

Editorial Board:

Dr. R. Gobinath

Prof. Sharif Atiquzzaman

Dr. Dr. Aravindan Balakrishnan

Dr. Athisayaraj Jebakumar J

Dr. P. Dinakar

Dr.P.Chitra

Dr. M.K. Praseeda

Prof. D. Deepikadevi

Dr. K.Usha Savithri

Dr. D.Solomon

Dr. S.Subash

Dr. K.M. Keerthika

Dr. B. Lingeswaran

Mr. B. Damodhara Prasath

Ms. P. Sherli

International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories (IJELLT) is a peer-reviewed, open access academic journal dedicated to promoting research and scholarship in the fields of English language, literature, and literary theories. Published monthly, IJELLT provides a platform for academicians, scholars, educators, and researchers to present their original work to a global audience. The journal upholds the highest standards of editorial integrity and academic excellence through a rigorous double-blind peer-review process. We welcome a wide range of submissions from theoretical and critical analyses to practical research, creative writing, and pedagogical studies related to English literature and language.

Literary Theories

Gendered Biopolitics and the Commodification of the Body in the Theatre of Manjula Padmanabhan

D. Paul Dinesh, Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore.

Dr. C. Anita, Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore.

Abstract: This article examines the representation of the human body as a site of gendered biopolitical control and economic commodification in the dramatic works of Manjula Padmanabhan. Situating Padmanabhan's theatre within debates on globalization, technological governance, and feminist body politics, the study explores how her plays expose the mechanisms through which power structures regulate and exploit human bodies. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the article argues that Padmanabhan's dramatic worlds reveal how bodies are governed through intersecting systems of global capitalism, technological surveillance, and patriarchal authority. Particular attention is given to *Harvest* and *Lights Out*, which foreground the transformation of human bodies into commodities within dystopian socio-economic structures. While *Harvest* dramatizes the literal commodification of organs within a transnational market economy, *Lights Out* exposes the normalization of gendered violence and the moral apathy of spectatorship. Through these dramatic settings, Padmanabhan critiques the ethical implications of neoliberal globalization and technological expansion, revealing how female bodies become vulnerable sites of surveillance, control, and exploitation. By examining these plays through the framework of gendered biopolitics, this article demonstrates that Padmanabhan's theatre functions as a critical intervention that interrogates the commodification of life in late capitalist societies.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Global Capitalism, Feminist Theatre, Commodification, Body Politics.



International Journal of English Literature and
Literary Theories

Introduction

In contemporary dramatic literature, the human body increasingly appears as a contested site where power, technology, and global capital intersect. Technological systems regulate biological life, biomedical markets commodify organs and tissues, and patriarchal structures continue to discipline gendered bodies. Theatre, with its emphasis on the physical presence of bodies on stage, provides a powerful medium for exploring these transformations and exposing the ethical implications of reducing human life to an object of economic exchange or technological regulation.

Within this context, the theatre of Manjula Padmanabhan offers a compelling exploration of the politics of the body in contemporary Indian drama. Her plays frequently depict dystopian or unsettling environments where human bodies are subject to surveillance, commodification, and exploitation. These dramatic narratives reflect anxieties associated with globalization, technological expansion, widening economic inequality, and the continued subordination of women within patriarchal systems. Padmanabhan gained international recognition with *Harvest*, which received the Onassis Prize for Theatre in 1997. The play imagines a dystopian future in which impoverished individuals from developing countries sell their organs to wealthy recipients in the global North. Through this disturbing premise, the play exposes the ethical contradictions of global capitalism, where the bodies of the poor become resources for the survival of the rich. Another significant work, *Lights Out*, explores the social indifference that surrounds gendered violence in urban society. The play depicts a group of middle-class individuals who repeatedly hear a woman being assaulted outside their apartment building but fail to intervene.

Although these plays differ in narrative structure and thematic focus, both reveal how power operates upon the human body through economic systems, technological infrastructures, and social attitudes. The body emerges not merely as a biological entity but as a political and economic object subject to governance.

This article examines Padmanabhan's theatre through the framework of gendered biopolitics. It argues that her plays illuminate how global capitalism and patriarchal authority converge to commodify and regulate human bodies, particularly those of marginalized individuals. By situating her dramatic works within the theoretical discourse of biopolitics and feminist body politics, this study highlights how Padmanabhan critiques the transformation of life itself into an object of market exchange.

Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics provides a crucial theoretical framework for this analysis. Foucault describes biopolitics as a form of power that focuses on the management and regulation of life, operating through systems that monitor, discipline, and optimize human bodies and populations (Foucault, 1978). In contemporary societies, these mechanisms increasingly intersect with global capitalism, which integrates biological life into market systems by transforming bodily materials such as organs, blood, and genetic information into commodities.

Feminist scholars have extended Foucauldian analyses by emphasizing how these regulatory structures operate through gendered hierarchies. Feminist body politics highlights the ways in which women's bodies have historically been subjected to intensified surveillance and control through norms governing sexuality, reproduction, and morality. Padmanabhan's plays dramatize these dynamics by depicting bodies that are simultaneously regulated by economic systems, technological infrastructures, and patriarchal social structures.

Commodification of the Body in Harvest

The dystopian world of *Harvest* offers one of the most striking dramatic explorations of bodily commodification in contemporary theatre. Set in a near future where multinational corporations purchase organs from impoverished individuals for transplantation into wealthy recipients abroad, the play exposes the extreme inequalities produced by global capitalism. The protagonist, Om Prakash, agrees to sell his organs to the corporation Inter Planta in exchange for financial security for his family. His decision is driven by economic desperation rather than genuine choice. When corporate agents arrive at his home, they install surveillance equipment and medical devices designed to monitor his body continuously. Their instructions reveal the extent to which his physical existence must now conform to corporate regulations:

"All implements of personal fuel preparation will be supplied exclusively by InterPlanta Services... You will consume only those fuels which will be made available to you by InterPlanta." (*Harvest*, 1.15)

This moment demonstrates how Om's body becomes subject to institutional control. Even basic activities such as eating are no longer personal decisions but corporate directives intended to preserve the organs purchased by a foreign recipient. In Foucauldian terms, the body becomes an object of biopolitical management, regulated through technological surveillance and disciplinary control.

The installation of monitoring technology further emphasizes the transformation of the body into biological property. The household effectively becomes part of the corporation's medical infrastructure:

"Mr. Om Prakash, I am pleased to inform you that the installation and initialization procedures have been completed satisfactorily... Please sign the following activity report..." (Harvest, 1.18)

Through such bureaucratic procedures, Om's existence is reduced to measurable biological functions. His body becomes an asset whose condition must be maintained for the benefit of a distant consumer, illustrating how human biology is integrated into global economic systems.

The play also exposes the ideological logic of commodification through the dialogue between Om and his brother Jeetu. Mocking the commercialization of the body, Jeetu remarks:

"Why? I'm no fool — cows, pigs, horses, I service all — for a price." (Harvest, 1.32)

Although sarcastic, this statement reveals how human bodies are treated as functional commodities whose value is determined by economic utility. The comparison to livestock underscores the dehumanizing logic of the organ market.

Om himself acknowledges that poverty compels his decision:

"What choice do we have in our world? What choices do we have?" (Harvest, 2.68)

This statement highlights the structural inequality underlying the organ trade. Economic desperation limits the characters' agency, making the sale of bodily organs appear as the only path toward financial stability.

Literary Theories

The character Jaya further reveals the gendered dimensions of this system. Although Om is the official donor, Jaya becomes the object of voyeuristic attention from the foreign recipient through surveillance technology installed in the household.

The contact module allows the recipient to watch and communicate with the family, transforming the domestic space into a site of observation and spectacle. Jaya gradually realizes that her body has also become part of this system of visual consumption.

Through this dynamic, the play illustrates how technological mediation extends patriarchal power across geographical boundaries. The recipient's gaze transforms Jaya into an object of curiosity and control, demonstrating how women's bodies become doubly vulnerable within structures of global capitalism and surveillance.

Through its dystopian narrative, *Harvest* exposes the disturbing logic of a world in which human bodies are integrated into global markets as tradable commodities. Padmanabhan reveals how corporate institutions regulate biological life through technological monitoring while economic inequality forces marginalized individuals to surrender bodily autonomy.

Spectatorship and Gendered Violence in *Lights Out*

While *Lights Out* examines a very different scenario from the dystopian economy of *Harvest*, it exposes another dimension of bodily vulnerability within patriarchal society. Whereas *Harvest* dramatizes the economic commodification of the body, *Lights Out* reveals how social indifference enables violence against women to continue unchecked.

The play unfolds entirely within the living room of an urban apartment where a group of middle-class individuals repeatedly hear the sounds of a woman being assaulted in a vacant lot outside their building. The violence itself remains offstage, while the characters remain physically safe within their domestic space. This spatial separation becomes central to the play's critique.

At the beginning of the play, the character Leela expresses concern about the repeated cries for help. However, her husband Bhasker immediately dismisses the idea of intervention:

"I don't want to stick my neck out, that's all." (*Lights Out*, 1.1.9)

Bhasker frames his refusal as a matter of personal safety, reflecting a broader social mentality in which self-preservation outweighs moral responsibility.

As the conversation develops, the characters collectively rationalize their inaction. When the issue of moral responsibility arises, Mohan dismisses the idea that passive observation constitutes complicity: “Someone told Leela that to watch a crime and do nothing is to be... involved in it yourself?”

“Huh! Ridiculous!”

“They are there and you are here. What’s the connection!” (Lights Out, 1.2.19)

By emphasizing physical separation, the characters construct a psychological boundary that allows them to distance themselves from the victim.

Their attempts to rationalize the situation become increasingly absurd when Mohan speculates that the screams might be the result of supernatural forces:

“I read somewhere that there’s a pattern to demonic possessions... the fits come on at regular times.” (Lights Out, 1.3.46)

This explanation reveals the extent to which the characters distort reality in order to avoid confronting the violence. By attributing the screams to something irrational, they remove the possibility of human responsibility.

Significantly, the assaulted woman never appears on stage. Although the audience hears her cries, she remains physically absent. This theatrical choice symbolizes the invisibility of victims of gendered violence within public discourse.

Toward the end of the play, the screams abruptly cease. When Naina looks outside, she announces: “You’re too late. The screaming’s stopped. There’s no one left out there... They’ve all gone!” (Lights Out, 1.3.62–63)

International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

The sudden silence creates a chilling moment of realization: the opportunity to intervene has passed. The characters’ prolonged hesitation has allowed the violence to continue unchecked.

Through this dramatic structure, Padmanabhan exposes the passive spectatorship that often characterizes social responses to gendered violence. The characters repeatedly acknowledge the brutality of the situation but remain confined within the safety of their apartment. Their inaction reflects broader social patterns in which violence against women is recognized yet rarely confronted. From a biopolitical perspective, the play illustrates how power operates not only through institutions but also through social norms that regulate behavior. Fear, conformity, and self-interest shape the characters' responses, demonstrating how ordinary individuals become complicit in systems of violence.

Conclusion

The theatre of Manjula Padmanabhan offers a powerful critique of a world in which human bodies increasingly become objects of economic exploitation and social control. Through dystopian narratives that expose the intersection of global capitalism, technological surveillance, and patriarchal authority, her plays illuminate the dynamics of gendered biopolitics.

In *Harvest*, the commodification of organs reveals how market systems transform biological life into tradable resources, subjecting marginalized bodies to corporate regulation and technological monitoring. In *Lights Out*, the normalization of violence exposes the social indifference that allows gendered oppression to persist. Taken together, these plays demonstrate how modern power operates through both institutional structures and everyday attitudes. Padmanabhan's theatre challenges audiences to confront the ethical consequences of treating the human body as a commodity and highlights the vulnerability of marginalized bodies within global systems of power. In doing so, her work serves as a significant critical intervention in contemporary debates on globalization, technology, and gender justice.

References

1. Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body*. University of California Press.
2. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.
3. Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: An introduction*. Pantheon.
4. Padmanabhan, M. (1996). *Lights out*. Ravi Dayal.
5. Padmanabhan, M. (1997). *Harvest*. Kali for Women.
6. Scheper-Hughes, N. (2000). The global traffic in human organs. *Current Anthropology*, 41(2), 191–224.