



Identity Politics and Dehumanisation in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* and Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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Received: 22 Nov 2024; Received in revised form: 20 Dec 2024; Accepted: 25 Dec 2024; Available online: 31 Dec 2024

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Abstract— This paper explores the themes of identity politics and dehumanisation in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* (1989) and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997). Both plays explore the sociocultural and political implications of identity while acknowledging the transformative effects of late capitalism on actual landscapes. The selected works examine the tension between personal desire, economic disparity, societal expectations, and commodification of human life. While Dattani critiques traditional gender norms, Padmanabhan addresses the intersections of global capitalism. This paper argues that both plays expose the ideology of prevailing capitalism, producing pre-constituted subjects in which one's role in society is predetermined. By examining the dynamic of social identity, the study locates analysis within the politics of space vis-à-vis power relations that reconstruct dominant hierarchal organisation and its implication to govern subordinates.



Keywords— Identity, Gender, Margin, Capitalism, Utilitarianism, Power

INTRODUCTION

Manjula Padmanabhan (1953–) and Mahesh Dattani (1958–) are contemporary Indian playwrights. They are known to readers through celebrated works such as *Light Out* (1984) and *Harvest* (1997; winner of the Onassis Prize; adapted into a film in 2001) by Padmanabhan and *Where There's a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993) by Dattani. Dattani is the first playwright to win the Sahitya Academy Award. He talks about the issue of gender roles and identity in his plays. His play *Final Solutions* deals with a conflict between Muslims and Hindus. Padmanabhan's *Light Out* talks about sexual violence against women in India. Both Dattani and Padmanabhan challenge certain dominant aspects of society, such as patriarchy, feudalism, gender issues, and global capitalism. The social and political conditions of

India are addressed in their plays. There are various themes and subject matter seen in Dattani and Padmanabhan, but dehumanisation and identity politics are some of the dominant issues. This study investigates the spiritual and political realms depicted in their plays. Dattani and Padmanabhan reveal a variety of sketches from all walks of human. The main argument of this paper, in this case, is to study some of the key elements in *Dance Like a Man* and Padmanabhan and showcase the existing sociocultural and political landscapes which can influence one's identity. Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* is a science fiction set in 2010 Bombay; it imagines a world in which a U.S.-based transnational corporation called InterPlanta Services sells its wealthy, ageing, and sick clients not only organ transplants but also whole-body transplants. In this context, as we will analyse in detail in the next section, the discourse

of identity, whose politics shapes the more significant understanding of the power in which space operates, of which *Dance Like a Man* and *Harvest* presents nuanced examinations of social relations.

The Gender Role in *Dance Like a Man*

The play *Dance Like a Man* by Dattani revolves around the lives of Bharatanatyam dancers Jairaj Parekh and his wife Ratna, exploring their sacrifice, love, and passions. The play examines the conflicts arising from personal dreams clashing with societal norms, particularly the tensions surrounding gender roles in a patriarchal society. Jairaj and Ratna are passionate about Indian classical dance and wish to establish a dance academy. They showcase their passion for Bharatanatyam dance and family tensions when personal dreams conflict with societal norms and expectations. The play unfolds in a non-linear fashion, moving between the present and the past, where Jairaj's father, Amritlal, disapproves of his son's dance career, perceiving it as a feminine activity. Jairaj's father, Amritlal Parekh, discourages Jairaj from taking his career as a dancer. Amritlal tries his best to stop Jairaj from becoming a dancer. Amritlal considers dance a feminine activity, stopping Jairaj from dancing. This act of discouragement reveals Amritlal's ingrained beliefs about masculinity and the gender roles that govern their world. His notion of gender roles is pseudoprogressive as he states, "A woman in man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in woman's world is pathetic" (52). This statement reflects that Amritlal is a very conservative man who believes that man's happiness lies always in being a man. He has his ideas and rules, reframing anyone in his family to do what they like.

This is a feudal world where the head of the family is a man. Amritlal represents this feudal world, which embraces the stereotypical gender roles — a single man, as the ultimate decision-maker, governs the family. According to Bryan S. Turner, patriarchy indicates "the power of men, a power which extends to the individual jurisdiction of men (or a man) over a family and its members, as well as the more general power of "the male" over the organisation of a social group or a society" (433). This quote highlights the rule of men, not just over women but also over the general structure of social relations. Amritlal belongs to a patriarchal system in which a man has the right to determine the fate of the entire family. In this sense, Amritlal does everything he can to prevent Jairaj from pursuing his career as a dancer, disregarding his son's only passion. The very idea of gender roles that he holds is contradictory to his liberal tag. He seeks Ratna's help to discourage his son from pursuing a career as a dancer; he states, "Help me and I'll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done" (52). This statement underlines his

desperation and determination to align his son with traditional notions of masculinity, showcasing the tension between societal expectations and individual passion.

Nevertheless, Jairaj and Ratna are concerned about their daughter Lata, who must perform an upcoming dance recital that could establish her career as a professional Bharatanatyam dancer. They are also anxious about whether her future husband, Viswas, will support her pursuit of classical dance after marriage. Viswas assures their concerns when Jairaj questions him about Lata's career. He responds, "Look, I don't mean I object to her dancing. It is her passion and it wouldn't be fair for me to" (62). Unlike Amritpal, Viswas recognises and respects the significance of love and passion. These intergeneration shifts highlight the dynamics of power and control, underlining how dominant societal structures often regulate spatial practices and personal ambitions. Dattani suggests the complexity of self and identity. Throughout the play, Jairaj is told not to behave like a woman. Dattani questions this societal stereotype about gender roles. Through portraying Jairaj's career as a Bharatanatyam dancer, Dattani challenges the conventional expectations of men and women. Amritlal — as a hardcore supporter of hierarchal organisations — reinforces the notions of masculinity over femineity, telling his son to be a man. Amritlal hatches a plan with Ratna to destroy Jairaj's dance career. Ratna's collaboration with her father-in-law illustrates how identity is shaped not only by individual desires but also by external pressures. Jairaj knows from the beginning that he wants to be a dancer, but Ratna's harsh criticism ultimately disrupts his ambitions to become an acclaimed Bharatanatyam dancer.

Globalisation, Ethics, and the Panopticon in *Harvest*

The play *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan is a science fiction drama that deals with the issue of identity and organ trade in India. Set in a futuristic 2010 in Mumbai, the play depicts machines increasingly replacing human beings. As a genre, science fiction — or sci-fi — is a significant medium for exploring the potential consequences of present-day actions, projecting them into speculative futures that challenge our ethical and social frameworks. According to M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, science fiction is applied to those narratives in which "an explicit attempt is made to render plausible the fictional world by reference to known or imagined scientific principles, or to a projected advance in technology, or to a drastic change in the organisation of society" (355). The impact of science fiction is so much that it creates tremendous scientific possibilities, and some of them have come true. *Harvest* opens up with Om Prakash, a twenty-year-old man struggling to support his family. His mother, Ma, insists he finds work regardless of the consequences.

Om's wife, Jaya, endures an unstable relationship with him while secretly engaging in an affair with her brother-in-law, Jeetu.

Due to economic setbacks, Om decides to sell his organs to a U.S.-based transnational corporation named InterPlanta Services. It is a Western company whose wealthy clients seek to purchase everlasting life through multiple, successive whole-body transplants. The U.S.-based company targets economically disadvantaged nations, particularly in third-world countries, convincing them to sell body parts in return for money. This is reflected when Om tells her mother he got the job in a place "like a big machine. They had... like iron bars, snaking around and around. And everywhere there were guards" (10). This quote highlights foreign factory plants in a third-world country where earning money is much more complicated than selling organs. When his mother asks about the pay scale, Om claims, "We'll have more money than you and I have names for! Who'd believe there's so much money in the world?" (11). This statement highlights the condition of Om's family, which is quite money-centric as Om has chosen to sell organs. Ma is unaware of Om's present-day job, which involves selling organs to a U.S.-based company. As Jodi Kim argues in her 2014 essay, Ma's confusion is a stark reminder of "sedimented ways in which we have come to understand the relationship between labor and money, or more generally the creation of value" (219). The Marxian perspective that labour is the foundation of value creation — the labour theory of value — has become increasingly complicated due to modern developments. In his analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the rise of wage labour, Karl Marx (1818–1883) remarks, "[T]hese newly freed men became sellers of themselves only after they had been stripped of their own means of production and the security provided by the old feudal arrangements" (875). When Marx described these newly liberated individuals as sellers of themselves, he meant that they were selling their labour power. He could not have envisioned that advancements in the life sciences would one day allow individuals to sell their literal biological selves, including their body parts and organs (Kim 220).

Padmanabhan engages with two significant concepts, utilitarianism and the panopticon, intertwining them to explore the ethical and social implications of exploitation in a globalised world. Robert Audi defines utilitarianism as the "moral theory that an action is morally right if and only if it produces at least as much good (utility) for all people affected by the action as any alternative action the person could do instead" (942). This ethical framework prioritises the greatest good for the greatest number, emphasising collective happiness and moral action to

maximise societal benefit. The theory of utilitarianism promotes happiness and moral ethics that produce particular good or joy in society. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), a key proponent of utilitarianism, also conceptualised the panopticon — a model of surveillance that enforces power through the internalisation of observation. It is a prisoner concept where a guard is watching prisoners, but prisoners do not know whether someone is watching them. This system fosters behavioural modification rooted in the internalisation of surveillance. The panopticon extends beyond its initial design for prisons, as Miran Božović (1957–) argues:

[A] building could be constructed resembling the panopticon from the outside; occasional screams, not of prisoners, but of people hired specifically for that purpose, could be heard from within. While the others would think that the offenders were being punished for their deeds, in truth, nobody at all would really be suffering punishment. A 'good of the second order' could then be produced without requiring any 'evil of the first order'. (7)

This quote highlights the psychological dimension of the panopticon, where the perception of discipline and punishment is enough to maintain control, even in the absence of actual punishment. The phrase 'good of the second order' depicts the societal order achieved without direct harm, aligning with utilitarian principles of maximising the greatest good for the greatest number. In this way, the panopticon concept manifests in the Prakash family through technological surveillance and economic coercion, where the fear of consequences forces individuals to obey, even without immediate punishment. The panopticon serves as a metaphor for the dehumanising systems of power, highlighting the destruction of individual entities. This concept is evident in the relationship between the Prakash family and Ginni, the organ recipient. Ginni monitors Om and his family through a videophone, placing them under constant surveillance. This panoptic mechanism ensures that their behaviours align with the expectations set by U.S.-based InterPlanta Service. This surveillance results in a loss of their autonomy, and their actions are shaped by Ginni, emphasising the dehumanising effects of commodification. Therefore, the Prakash family lives under a strict disciplinary regime characterised by meticulous regulation of their bodies to ensure the harvesting of healthy organs. The Contact Module — a white, faceted globe suspended from the ceiling — is an electronic device that enables Om to communicate with Ginni.

Furthermore, the Contact Module operates as a pedagogical tool, enabling Ginni to instruct the family on the proper personal hygiene and self-care protocols, as she

desires to avoid receiving diseased or compromised organs. Ginni is a wealthy American — a young, beautiful white woman — whose health diseases remain undisclosed until the end of the play. Ginni epitomises the power imbalance between the West and the East. This imbalance is evident in the way Ginni dictates the Prakash family's behaviour, as shown in the following way:

The Most Important Thing is to keep [Om] smiling. Coz if [Om's] smiling, it means his body's smiling and if his body's smiling, it means his organs are smiling. And that's the kind of organs that'll survive a transplant best, smiling organs — I mean, God forbid that it should ever come to that, right? But after all, we can't let ourselves forget what this programme is about! I mean, if I'm going to need a transplant — then by God, let's make it the best damn transplant that we can manage! (41)

This quote underlines the exploitative nature of organ trade, where the marginalised are reduced to mere commodities to sustain the privileged elite. In this context, utilitarianism and panopticon converge in a way that critiques the sociocultural and moral landscapes. While utilitarianism promotes the welfare of the majority, it often marginalises minority groups, reducing them to lower-level positions within hierarchical organisations. The Prakash family strives for financial stability, ultimately compelling one member to sell their organs. Om lacks insight into the consequences of his actions, leading him to sell his organs. In doing so, his individuality is distorted as he sacrifices agency for the greater good of his family. This aligns with the utilitarianism principle of maximising the collective goods, but it also showcases the tendency to devalue the individual within a group.

Survival, Choice, and the Politics of Identity

The politics of identity is one of the key themes in *Harvest*, reflecting power, culture, and societal norms that shape one's sense of identity. It is a personal and sociocultural construct shaped by external forces that can diminish individual agency, often reducing people to mere commodities within a globalised, profit-driven system. David Matsumoto defines identity as "the way individuals understand themselves and are recognised by others" (244). This definition highlights the complex nature of identity and its encompassing personal, cultural, and relative dimensions. Moreover, identities are shown to be politically constructed by certain societal groups that wield power and establish norms. There are different kinds of identity: personal, cultural, and relative. These identities are somehow construed by politics, which influences our day-to-day life. In the case of Om, he perceives himself as a

commodity, readily marketable and devoid of agency regarding his actions. He remains indifferent to the implications of his choices and accepts a job from U.S.-based InterPlant Service without questioning the nature of the work. Upon returning home, he remarks:

Oh — there was some pamphlet they gave us to read, right in the beginning. Just to tell us to be relaxed and to do whatever we were told. In that it said that once we were selected, each man would get special instructions. That we would be monitored carefully. Not just us but our...lives. To remain employed, we have to keep ourselves exactly as they tell us. (13)

This quote highlights the dehumanising nature of employment, reducing Om to mere tools of utility. He is doing what he is told to rather than what he wishes to do. This blind adherence to materiality makes him more of a machine, not a human who can think and act on free will. Om remains a static character throughout the play, symbolising his lack of agency amidst the uncontrolled circumstances faced by his family. The only significant shift occurs when the guards arrive to take him away for the 'harvest' of his organs. Om captures the transformations within sociocultural and political landscapes, reflecting the dehumanising effects of global capitalism and technological domination. The resistance in the form of Om's hiding from guards is futile. It shows the helplessness of individuals against powerful institutions.

However, in the case of Ma, we witness a wilful submission to the modern technological world, where individuals are reduced to passive consumers within a capitalist system. Her unquestioning acceptance of Om's decision to sell his organs highlights her support for the commodification of human life. Ma's lack of resistance showcases a broader societal tendency to accept dominant economic and political systems. There is a clear-cut distinction between human and machine. Om's wife, Jaya, is aware of the dehumanising effects of modern technology and resists becoming part of the commodified world. Unlike other characters, Jaya is rebellious, questioning the dominant hierarchical organisations that treat subordinates as tools for economic gain. Her resistance to modern technology reflects autonomy in an increasingly commodified world. Jaya challenges the oppressive systems that govern her life, symbolising resistance against the dehumanising forces of capitalist commodification. When Virgil, an American man, asks her to get pregnant. Jaya says, "You've shown me that it's not really mine any more. It's yours. I'm not willing to caretake *my* body for *your* sake! The only thing I have left which is still mine is my death. My death and my pride" (101). This strong statement not only reflects her unwillingness to submit but

also signals her rejection of the objectification and commodification of her body. Jaya is seen as a tool to fulfil Virgil's personal desires by a U.S.-based corporation rather than as an individual with autonomy over her body. Om, Ma, and Jaya each represent different responses to modern-day technology and its impact on their lives. They are viewed as commodities by the West, and their identities are reduced to the value of their organs. This materialistic perspective dehumanises them, reducing their worth to economic utility. Through the Prakash family experiences, the play critiques the power imbalance that forces individuals to compromise their bodies for the greatest number.

CONCLUSION

By discussing *Dance Like a Man* and *Harvest*, this paper examines the dehumanising effects of societal expectations and capitalistic exploitation on both personal and collective identity. Dattani critiques the constricting gender roles within a patriarchal society, while Padmanabhan examines the commodification of human bodies within a global capitalist framework. Both plays challenge conventional norms surrounding gender, class, and power. Through their respective narrative structures, Dattani and Padmanabhan uncover the complexities of navigating selfhood in systems that prioritise exploitation, emphasising the fragmentation of the human psyche into separate and often conflicting parts that characterise the dehumanising condition. The tension between collective utility and individual agency emerges as a central theme in both plays, drawing attention to the ethical implications of prioritising the collective good over individual well-being, especially in exploitation and commodification. In this light, Om and Jairaj function as critiques of systems that suppress individuals of their autonomy. This exploration of identity destabilises the binary of centre/margin, offering a vision for a more democratic and inclusive future.

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