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The Commodification Of Bodies: The International Organ Trade in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* (1997)

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Abstract

To date, there are more than 32 million people around the world who have viewed the *Body World*s exhibitions,[1] which include "world-body plastinates, individual organs, organ configurations and transparent body slices" (*Body Worlds*). Due to the invention of the new preservation method – plastination, invented by Dr. Gunther von Hagens in 1977– bodies, organs and body slices are kept in perfect shape and are able to show the inner construction of bodies. The purpose of *Body Worlds* exhibitions listed on the *Body Worlds* website is: "to educate the public about the inner workings of the human body and show the effects of poor health, good health and lifestyle choices" (*Body Worlds*). Though serving the purpose of education, the bodies remain controversial because of their ethnic origins. *Body Worlds* claims that specimens on display came from "body donors, individuals who bequeathed that, upon their death, their bodies could be used for educational purposes in the exhibition" (*Body Worlds*). However, a news article titled "Von Hagens forced to return controversial corpses to China" ran in *The Guardian* stated that seven corpses from China were returned after Dr. Von Hagens admitted that the bodies might have been those of executed prisoners in China; at least two corpses stored by the anatomist at his center in China had bullet holes in their skulls, and seven of them had head injuries[2]. It became clear that these bodies from the Global South became the "donors" without their consent, and with the help of the local corrupt government which was complicit with the exchange of what was deemed expendable bio matter. Moreover, the *Body Worlds* exhibitions also raise an issue of the commodification of bodies, both living and dead. The *Body Worlds* website offers plastinated pieces for sale, "from plastinated fruit jewelry to entire humans [the latter requires authorization]"[3] (*Body Worlds*). On the *Body World*s website, people can buy pieces, slides, and even the whole plastinated bodies. The commodification of plastinated bodies is similar to the Chinese prisoners, whose bodies were commodified against their own wills as products on the *Body World*s website. The commodification of the dead bodies and organs provokes a series of questions on biomatter for both the dead and the living: how are bodies and organs objectified and commodified by the Global North? How do economic considerations orchestrate exchange of bio matter between the Global North and the Global South? How do modern technologies provide incentive for illegal organ trafficking on a material level and on an ideological level? Padmanabhan presents us with Indian characters that are structurally positioned to sell, trade and reproduce organs due to global economic disparity coupled with the lack of rights within nation–states. Through the analysis of the *Body Worlds* exhibitions, Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," Lawrence Cohen's definitions of "bioavailability" and "operability," the technological dehumanization found in *Harvest* demonstrates the parallel relationship between dead tissues and the living organ trade. Also, I will contend that technology has stripped bodies of the Global South, specifically Indian bodies, down into "bare life" and pure commodities for the international organ trade.

The illegal organ trade has become a global issue which evokes a consideration ofthe potential effect and threat of modern technologies.

Key Words: body, commodification, plastination, bare life, dehumanization

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Spurred on by the controversial factors arising from the *Body Worlds* exhibitions, ManjulaPadmanabhan dramatizes the international organ trafficking in her science fiction play *Harvest* (2003). By discussing the flourishing of illegal organ trade in India**,** she shows her concerns for the new challenges and threats in the twentieth-first century. Padmanabhan writes that "the organ trade provided an appropriate platform for discussing some of the possible challenges, particularly in the context of multi-nation corporations" (*Harvest* 4). In *Harvest*, Padmanabhan presents a small family caught upin an illegal organ trade case in urban India. Om Prakash, the husband and the bread-earner of the family, is unable to find a job and decides to sell his organs for money in order to support the family. Ma, Om's mother, an old housewife, admires Western lifestyle and is addicted to new technology. Jaya, Om's wife, isa strong female figure in the play and symbolically represents "Justice."Jeetu, Om's younger brother, is a male prostitute whose eyes and body are taken away by the North American organ recipients at the end of the play. Other characters in the play are the Guards and the Agents. They are the executors of a recipient's will. After the husband Om signs the contract for selling his organs, the Guard and Agents come to install the Video Couch and Module, expedients created to modify their conducts so that the Global North recipients - first represented as astereotypically represented American goddess Ginni and later represented as an attractive American man Virgil - can communicate with the donor's families. Jeetu'seyes and body are taken away by Virgil, who intends to impregnate Jaya with Jeetu's body. At the end, Jaya refuses to give up her body. She declares to kill herself to resist becoming the soilfor the harvesting of new healthy organs.

Harvest contrasts bodiless North Americans and embodied Indians; the latter's organs to be commodified and harvested. Similar to the inventor of the *Body Worlds*, Dr. Von Hagens, who distances himself from the cruelty of purchasing human bodies by establishing a research center in China, the North American recipient in *Harvest* also separates himself from the illegal organ trade by having the local Agency and Guard conduct the trade operationsfor him.In both cases, the anonymous Chinese corpses and the distant Indian organ "plants" are reduced to being "owned" by others and with no control over their own self. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls this state "bare life," a term used to define humans as "'biopolitical' subjects" which are "regulated and governed at the level of population in a permanent 'state of exception'[4] outside the normal legal framework [. . .] humans as animals in nature without political freedom" (qtd. in Owns 568). Therefore, subjects such as the corpses used by the*Body Worlds* exhibitions exist only within a political framework. Furthermore, according to EwaPlonowskaZiarek, "bare life" is captured by the political in a two-fold way: one, "in the form of the exclusion from the *polis* – it is included in the political in the form of exclusion;" and second, "in the form of the unlimited exposure to violation, which does not count as a crime" (90). It is the sovereign rightof the individual which the expendable life erases. Another example of bodies trapped without any political freedom can be found in the concentration camps of World War II where prisoners had no claim on their own bodies and were excluded from the basic right to live, or therights of mobility and speech. Agamben uses the example of the concentration camp to further demonstrate thedictation of the sovereign power and the subjugation of "bare life." Though Agamben's concept of "bare life" is demonstrated by extreme cases, he believes that it exists in every society because of the existing hierarchy based on power. In order to better understand this new life formin the Indian family portrayed in Padmanabhan's*Harvest*, we need to look at India, where a larger number of organ donors live.

Bare Life: Transplantation of Human Organs Act of India (THOA)

In 1994, the Parliament of India passed the Transplantation of Human Organs Act (THOA) in order to regulate organ transplantation in India. THOA made "the sale of a solid organ" illegal; however, it offers exceptions with permissions granted by the Authorization Committees. THOA "allowed for the transplantation of kidneys from living as opposed to brain-dead persons if donors were related to recipients in one of four permitted ways: as parents, children, siblings, or spouses" (Cohen 81). The Authorization Committee requires an application and formal interview with donor and recipient, and dissimilar donors would not get through the Authorization Committee, which will raise ethical problems if a lower-caste kidney is transplanted to a higher-caste body. However, with the help of the standardized procedures for evaluating legitimate exception, the patient's family can always find sellers and potential donors. For instance, from servants and poor relatives who are from the same caste of the patient. Cultural anthropologist Lawrence Cohen refers to "biomorality" or "bioethics"[5]when talking about organ trafficking and its relation to the caste and community systems in Indian society. Regulations set up by THOA is not an obstacle the illegal organ trafficking, instead, exceptions the law offered made the economic status of individual becomes the sole factor contributing to the flourishing illegal organ trafficking.As a result, after the establishment of THOA and the Authorization Committees, there is a proliferation of criminal accusation and illegal organ trade.

In order to maintain kinship relations, and remain a "good" political subject of the state, a family member is expected to provide an organ when another family member requires one. Padmanabhan dramatizes this corruption and coercion in *Harvest*, demonstrating how economics solely determine the organ "donation." Furthermore, as it presented in the play, the economic relationship between the North American recipients gradually replaced the kinship relations among family members. Padmanabhan draws on this distortion of kinship in *Harvest*. A fictitious kinship is established between the recipient and the individual donor. The close relationship between Ginni and each family member even replace the real kinship relationship among family members in the household. Om shows his trust and close relationship to Ginni by saying "We've known each other only for two months, but from the first day itself, I've felt that you are just like my sister!" (*Harvest* 40) Compared to Om's negation of his wife, Jaya, and his brother, Jeetu, Om establishes "trust" with Ginni, who "really cares for us" (47). The fictitious relationship established between Gini and the Indian family not only reinforces the passivity of the family by the imagined power, but also replaces the kinship relations between family members, distancing them from each other.

We can have better understanding of the concept of "bare life" in the case of organ exchange in India. Cohen points out that a set of exceptions has been constituted to the formal logic of exception under the law of THOA: "1) One had to be ethical and not just let people die; 2) The formal questions you were allowed by law to ask made coaching and cheating likely and unenforceable; 3) Politicians pressured you to make additional exceptions; 4) The entire system was corrupt and the exception had become the norm to preserve reasonable standards" (Cohen 82). THOA sets up people, especially relatives/kins, to bear the responsibility of sacrifice in a zone of exception, in which they trade the human tissues of their bodies. Ironically, "donating" organs to a relative who's in need, serves to maintain their political status while being exposed to extreme violation, as Ziarekindicates. The set of exclusions are the content which the government uses to determine what permanent exclusions will be made into law. THOA, the law, and the government, seek to push Indian people into becoming potential donors of the organ transplantation – reducing them towards a state of "bare life." Cohen concludes that "common norms of regulated bioavailability became increasingly incoherent" (85). With the exception granted by the Authorization Committee, the government offers a permanent state of exception. In *Harvest*, organ transplantation is only being offered with exceptions among kins, but nevertheless becomes eventually normalized by the THOA. In Om's organ transplantation contract, no governmental officials interfered withthe sales. Conversely, the organ transplantation company even hires the local Indian people working for them. The Guard and the Agents, who are called "monster[s]," "beast[s]" and "machine[s]", conspire with the Global North, and get the local poor residents involved in the illegal organ trade (14). In this case, with the legal guarantee of the THOA, the Global South families in *Harvest* become the bioavailable and operable objects which facilitates organ transplantations.

Bioavailability and Operability

The development of new medical technology, including medicines and medical equipment, has made organ trafficking much more complex in India and has left the government and law enforcementpowerless in regulating it. Cohen writes that to be bioavailable means "to be available for the selective dis-aggregation of one's cells or tissues and their reincorporation into another body (or machine)" (Cohen 83). According to Cohen, three issues led to the expansion of bioavailability. The first one is the development of mechanical techniques. Before the twentieth century, only very close relations were bioavailable; even among family members there was a great chance of biologicalrejection. However, the fast development of mechanical techniques allows for safer and more effective transplants. The second issue is the rapid development of transfusion medicine and immunological techniques developed after World War II. This transformation made Western Europe and North America the dominant bioavailable fields. The final and the most recent issue is the development and manufacture of effective immunosuppressant drugs, which "made possible both the globalization of the transplant operation and the emergence of multiple bioavailable populations, not only the almost dead" (Cohen 85). More and more people could serve as donors; economic need and political vulnerability also became the potential reasons for bioavailability.

Bioavailibity alone doesn't lead to the proliferation of illegal organ trafficking between the Global South and the Global North. The paid owners from the Global South also need to be operable. "Operability" is another term Cohen introduces in his investigation of organ transplantation in Indian cities in the 1990s. Cohen defines it as "the degree to which one's belonging to and legitimate demands of the state are mediated through invasive medical commitment" (86). Through his investigation in India, Cohen finds that transplantation has become very popular in Chennai, Mumbai, and Bangalore, and other major Indian cities where numerous centers and clinics were built. Poor women were the most exploited group in these areas which suggesting how economic status and gender play important roles in coercing people from the Global South, especially women, into subjugation. Most of the female sellers in Chennai have had previous operations, tubal ligations, or the "family planning operation" before they sell a kidney[6]. In other words, those women have to give up their wombs for other people's well-being. In *Harvest,*Padmanabhan draws out implications to present the commodification and degradation of women. Jaya, Om's wife symbolically represents "Justice," because of her active resistance to the colonization and exploration of the North American recipients (*Harvest*91). Though Virgil claims that what he wants is Om's organ; in fact, Jaya's womb is the terminal organ he wants to use for reproduction and resourcing more healthy human organs. In *Harvest*, Jaya, as well as other male characters in the play, Om and Jeetu, are all the targets and victims of the illegal organ trade.

Technological Dehumanization

In Padmanabhan's*Harvest*, technology regenerates the domination and degradation of individuals of the Global South, which Aysha Ramachandran defines it as "technological dehumanization" (170). In "Ethics and the Anthropology of Modern Reason," Andrew Lakoff and Stephen J. Collier define"regime of living" as "congeries of moral reasoning and practice that emerge in situations that present ethical problems – that is, situations in which the question of how to live is at stake" (420). The "regime of living" and thestatus of the Global South characters in the play include all the modern disciplinary apparati - "the maintenance of the personal resources" for survival, "domestic unit" for family, and"fuel" for food. These elements compelled Global South donors intoa new "regime of living," as "bare lives," outside the political frame (Lakoff 15). In this new "regime of living," bodies are reduced to "bare lives" which bear a common characteristic – passivity. In addition to technologies of bioavailability and operability, Padmanabhan makes it clear that technologies reinforce this passivity and dehumanize the human body through three levels: first, the hyper-mediation of screen, which demonstrates the dominant

power of technology on an ideological, conscious level; second, a level of bodily inscription; and third, a challenge for human mortality.

The first level of this technology dehumanization lies on an ideological and conscious level. The moment Om signs for the organ sale, a Guard comes to install the equipment – the module. On one level, ostensibly, the advance communication device is a medium between the Global South donor's family and the Global North recipient to personalize their relationship, and to show the kind ofcare which one might find in donations from a relative. The recipient is initially presented as Ginni, the epitome of a stereotypically depicted American-style youth goddess, who has blonde hair, white skin, and a sweet and sexy voice. By the end of the play, she morphs into Virgil, a rich and attractive man, with an American accent, who intends to impregnate Jaya with Jeetu's body. They are the phantoms of Jeetu and Jaya – the ideal people they want to see with the ideal life they want to live, which Om described as "heaven" (*Harvest*11). This modern equipment acts as a guise for the illegal organ trade. Gradually, additional technology is introduced to lull the family into passive acquiescence. The VideoCouch and the Module immerse the Indian family into an imagined fantasy of civilized and rich life, and they function as mutual supplements for each other, which contributes to the new "regime of living." To some extent, the VideoCouch could be seen as another form of "colonial education," making the desire of the neo-colonized people (in this case, Om, Jeetu and Ma) compatiblewith the ideology of the colonists (the Global North recipients). ShitalPravinchandran comments about the effect of the technology, which "seduce[s] and police[s] the third-world donors into submission" (8). The effect of the technology empowers the Global North recipients and enhances the Indian donors' passivity.

On another level, technology functions as the factor that reveals the disparity of power and keeps the whole family in a state of complete visibility and under "a real subjugation" (Foucault 230). Through "Panopticonism" in a Foucauldian sense[7], power orchestrates the social by establishing "a fictitious relation." In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes, "A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. He who is subjected to a field of power, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (230). In Foucault's concept of "panopticonism," power has become inscribed in the subject himself,who regulates his conduct unconsciously according to the existing rules. When Jeetu first returns home after his brother signed for the organ sale, both Om and Ma are trying to hide him because they believe the recipient will be on the other end of the module and willsee everything. Compared to the intrusion of Jeetu, the family is more concerned with being late for lunch. In this case, the imagined gaze on the other end of the module acted as an imagined power over the family, regulating their "proper" conducts.

Finally, technology serves as a tool to challenge human beings' mortality. Aysha Ramachandran notes that, "bodily penetration is no longer associated with sex and reproduction, but with the endless prolongation of life through technology" (169). Jaya is an active figure in resistance. She describes those "kind" and "sweet" recipients as vampires, demons who only help themselves. After she finds out the recipients' goal is for her to give birth for future organ harvest, she seeks to fight back by killing herself. Both Om and Jeetu lose their reason and sense and become numb in their phantom state. Jaya is the only person who does not loss her conscious in the comfort produced by the advanced technology. At the end of the play, Jaya says that "The pain tells me that I'm alive. I want the pain!" (*Harvest*88) By declaring that she wants pain like a human being, Jaya claims her own sovereign to her body. According to Aysha Ramachandran, Jaya is "the first and only character in the play who can distinguish between real and virtual, between the illusion of freedom as easy and without cost, and true freedom bought with pain and risk" (170). Jaya is not seduced by Virgil or subjugated to the comforts brought by modern technologies, and shows her resistance to being reduced to "bare life" by insisting on pain. Her demand for Virgil's physical presence in the last scene is significant in challenging the bodiless North American recipients, also by self-sacrifice; she challenges the empowered technology and global economic relations which prolongs the bodiless people.

It is also relevant to point out that *Harvest* was put on stage with the combination of magic and science fiction effects. It adopted different technologies and equipments to help generate imagination and convey the magic effects. Both the writer and audience have to submit to the effect of technology in order to watch the play on stage.

The Commodification of Bodies of the Global South

Through the enabling demands of technology for bodies of the Global South, specifically Indian bodies, Padmanabhan prompts us to acknowledge the coerced bodies in *Harvest*, which have been commodified and reduced to "bare life."Environmental activist and eco feminist Vandana Shiva believes that commodification is promoted by globalization. She writes that "the dominant meaning and form of globalization is economic or corporate globalization. This is the globalization of capitalist patriarchy in which everything is a commodity, everything is for sale, and the only value a thing has is the price it can bring in the global market place" (Shiva 141). Shiva's definition of globalization opens upa new understanding of the contemporary capitalist society. Our society turns to an "ownership society" where water, land, and even biomatterturn into commodities on the global market.

Postcolonial scholar ShitalPravinchandra pushes Shiva's idea of "ownership society" further and traced to the consumption process. Pravinchandra points out that both organs of the Global South and objects they produced are merely for the consumption of the Global North. She writes that organs are not products of bodies' laboring, but a peculiar kind of commodity which is extracted and harvested from them. The organ is indeed "a product that can be sold without the expenditure of labor[8], while promising to generate 'wealth without production, value without effort'" (Pravinchandra 2). Due to this quality of the organ trade, the organ is similar to Marx's example of commodity – the land. In the third volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx introduces "the trinity formula," and he points out land serves as the ground where the capital/profit has been produced[9]. The human body from the Global South is similar to the land in Marx's capital production, both of which function as the ground to be exploited for organs and capital respectively.Pravinchandran writes that, like land, the body "is mined for its organs, and [. . .] organs are removed, harvested, from the body" (4). Pravinchandran develops a parallel relationship between the human body and the land: "The extractable human body part is accordingly assimilated to the yield or crop; this is the commodity with genuine use-value, the part that it is profitable to detach from the whole" (13). What "recipients" are looking for is a healthy, quality harvest of organs.

In *Harvest*, Om is the one who signs the organ trade contract; and yet his wife and Jeetu are the real donors. As an elderly brother and husband, Om is the dominant male figure in the whole family. In contrast, Jeetu, both hated by Ma and Om, was excluded from the family. He is the less powerful figure in both the public and domestic sphere. Om, the relatively powerful figure, does all the paperwork for Jeetu, conspires with the recipient and is responsible for Jeetu's loss. Figuratively, Om is similar to the government that sets up exceptions and makes them permanent. Om's relationship with the rest of the family suggests an allegory of the nation, India, to Global North countries. More importantly, Padmanabhan's play also represents the disparity of power on an international level. In the preface, Padmanabhan states in the introduction of *Harvest* that "For the sake of coherence this play is set in Bombay, the Donors are Indian and the Recipients, North American. Ideally, however, the Donors and Recipients should take on the racial identities, name, costumes and accents most suited to the location of the production" (*Harvest* 6). The illegal organ trade case in this urban Indian family could be reproduced in any corner of the world and be applied to any country. I believe that by using this strategy, Padmanabhan intentionally creates a "type" of regime whose power is resisted on multiple levels. Furthermore, Om's relationship with other family members is not only the allegory of Global North to India, but also demonstrates the structural relationship between Global South and Global North.

Notes

1. *Body Worlds* presents exhibitions of real human bodies which are preserved by the new preservation method of plastination invented by Dr. Gunther von Hagens. It is an ongoing exhibition first started in 1995 in Japan. Health education is the primary mission of *Body Worlds*. It also seeks to provide the audience with opportunity to betterunderstand the human body and its functions. Additionally, it reveals the individuality of each human being, not only through the visible exterior, but also through the interior of their bodies. *Body Worlds* Store link http://www.bodyworlds.com/en/store.html
2. *The Guardian*, 23 January 2004.
3. The sales restricted specimens are human materials and human specimens andare only sold to "qualified user[s]," which are "institutions or individuals which use sales restricted specimens exclusively for research and educational purposes or for medical, diagnostical and therapeutic education***;*** universities, hospitals, schools and museums or medical scientists, professors, assistant lecture***rs*** and others who work on medical and educational research projects comprise these institutions and individuals" (*Body Worlds*).
4. The "state of exception" is "a political state of siege [. . .] [which was declared] by parliament (or, additionally, by the head of state) in the case of imminent danger to external or internal security" of a country (Agamben 12). World War I demonstrates how the state of exception became the permanent state of a country. Agamben writes that most countries declare the entire country in a state of siege during the war; however, most of the laws passed during that time were "pure and simple delegations of legislative power to the executive . . . which granted the government an all but absolute power to regulate by decree the production and trade of food stuffs" (12).
5. Bioethics is an area of particular concern. It is a recent specialized branch of morality, whose focus is "the dilemmas, questions, worries and controversies arising from modern Western medicines, biomedical research, bioengineering, biotechnology and attendant/allied process" (Tangwa 222).
6. Among the interviews made in 1998 in Chennai, Cohen finds out that there was "the ubiquitous presence for these women of a prior operation: specifically, every one of the almost thirty sellers I spoke had a tubal ligation, the 'family planning operation [. . .] the women were informed, early on in their enlisting, that for health reasons they would have to have had the family planning operation in order to be able to sell a kidney'" (86).
7. Panopticonism first came from Jeremy Bentham's design for a new model of prisons. In the Panapticon, one guard can stay in the center and watch over many prisoners.
8. Many feminist scholars contested whether or not women's reproduction is labor. Feminists, such as Monique Wittig and Donna Haraway, believe that reproduction is production - a kind of labor. Similarly, operations of organ "donation" would include preparation (including the pre-op tubal ligations) recovery.
9. In Part VII, Chapter 48, Volume 3, *Capital*, Marx writes that the trinity formula includes capital, land, and labour and "comprises all the secrets of the social production process" (568).

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