Materialistic Desire, Consumerism and Human Relationship in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest*

Dr. Sohel Aziz  
Assistant Professor  
Raj Kumar Goel Institute of Technology  
Ghaziabad, U.P., India

Abstract
Critically much acclaimed play *Harvest*, written by Manjula Padmanabhan, presents a futuristic society to portray the neo-capitalist attitude of developed countries towards the developing countries. In this neo-capitalist approach, developed countries propagate a sinister consumer culture as an ideal life style to which subjects from developing countries, like India, are attracted without realizing much its dire consequences. Their materialistic desire and willingness to embrace the consumer culture for social mobility and to acquire better life style has left them with a dehumanizing effect that affects their social and familial relationships. The subjects are turned into an object or commodity with use value and exchange value which they sell to the buyers from developed countries for better prospects of life. This paper analyzes the materialistic desire of the characters and how and why these characters are ready to embrace the consumer culture of the society. Further this paper also shows how the protagonist of the play has turned into an object in the hands of developed country and what adverse circumstances and effects he has faced in his life. This paper also focuses on the adverse effect of the consumer culture in the lives of the characters and how at the end one character, Jaya, has brought a ray of hope, amidst bleak images of humanity, in dealing with this dehumanizing and demoralizing effect of consumerism and neo-capitalist attitude.

**Keywords:** Materialism, Consumer Culture, Neo-Capitalism, Consumer Behaviour, Indian Women Theatre, Human Relationship, Manjula Padmanabhan.

Indian women playwrights have come a long way to portray the social condition of women in a patriarchal structure depicting the oppression and suppression of women in public and private domain as well as the impact of colonization in Indian society but very few playwrights have taken drama as a vehicle to show the adverse effect of human being’s appetite for consumer culture and materialistic pursuit through the portrayal of futuristic society. Rich in thematic content for its multi-layered meaning hidden in the direct transaction of body organ in exchange of money between the developed country and the third world country, the play *Harvest*, written by Manjula Padmanabhan who has also been awarded the prestigious Onassis Prize for Theatre, also depicts human relationship affected by the growing materialistic desire catalyzed by the advancement of technology.
In the post globalization era India has emerged as one of the biggest markets for developed countries not only in terms of selling products but also as a source of raw commodity. The impact of globalization has been seen in India’s consumer market where durable and non-durable consumer products have become the main attraction of elite and upper middle class people but the poor class people, who are mostly devoid of the facilities provided by these consumer products, also eager to have it though it is different thing that they cannot afford it. But still there are lots of consumer products like T.V., mobile etc. are being used by poor people too. The availability of abundant consumer products in the reach of all classes of people has created a materialistic desire among them and it has brought not only social behavioural change but also it affects human relationships in society. Though these products have made our life comfortable but the adverse effect reflected in our social, cultural, economical and personal sphere cannot be negated as it demands creation as well as alteration of new space in social life and especially in personal life that contests with the traditional space in familial life.

Although many theorists have agreed upon the promising value of materialistic culture and technological advancement in society, at the same time contradictory views are also expressed regarding the detrimental effect of this materialistic pursuit resulting in the loss of human values and ethics as well as changes in interactions and expectations of human beings. Tim Kasser in his book *The High Price of Materialism* sums up after observing the relation between materialist human being and consumer culture in the following words:

Because values have broad effects on human behavior, the extent to which individuals focus on materialistic pursuits affects the way they interact with other people. When people place a strong emphasis on consuming and buying, earning and spending, thinking of the monetary worth of things, and thinking of things a great deal of the time, they may also become more likely to treat people like things. Philosopher Martin Buber referred to this interpersonal stance as I-It relationships, in which others’ qualities, subjective experience, feelings, and desires are ignored, seen as unimportant, or viewed only in terms of their usefulness to oneself. In such relationships, other people become reduced to objects, little different from products that may be purchased, used, and discarded as necessary. Buber contrasted this objectifying type of relationship with an I-Thou relationship in which other people are recognized as experiencing entities with subjective feelings and perspectives that may differ from one’s own, but are nonetheless just as important. (67)

After his study of the behaviour of preschoolers, college students, and adults, he concludes that:

[m]aterialistic values lead people to “invest” less in their relationships and in their communities. Notably, this relative lack of care for connectedness is reflected in low-quality relationships characterized by little empathy and generosity, and by objectification, conflict, and feelings of alienation. Such values thus weaken the fibers that bind couples, friends, families, and communities together, thereby working against the satisfaction of our needs for intimacy and connection. (Kasser 72)

Almost similar view is expressed by Henri Lefebvre, in his discussion of relation between use-value and exchange-value of commodity in the consumer market where human beings are conversely become an object—a commodity where each and everyone thinks other in terms of use-value and exchange-value. Lefebvre informs:

Yet between living individuals there exist only living relations— acts and events. But these become interwoven in a global result or social mean. Once launched on its existence the Commodity involves and envelopes the social relations between living men. It develops, however, with its own laws and imposes its own consequences, and then men can enter into relations with one another only by way of products, through commodities and the market, through the currency and money. Human relations seem to be nothing more than relations between things. (80)
Further Lefebvre asserts that relations between human beings are operated and manifested through the relations between things—“money relation and the exchange of products” (80)—but “these relations between things and abstract quantities are only the appearance and expression of human relations in a determinate mode of production, in which individuals (competitors) and groups (classes) are in conflict or contradiction” (80).

The inevitable corollary of this materialistic culture seems evident in the ever increasing gap between the rich and the poor as preoccupation with materialistic pursuit reflects the lifestyle that becomes an indicator of class division in society. Whereas many critics have asserted the benefits of consumer culture and materialistic desire in the poor people, Zygmunt Bauman highlights the creation of ‘new poor’ class and traces means of mitigating poverty in the era of consumerism in his seminal book *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. At first he explains the meaning of ‘normal life’ in consumer society as:

> [t]he life of consumers, preoccupied with making their choices among the panoply of publicly displayed opportunities for pleasurable sensations and lively experiences. A ‘happy life’ is defined by catching many opportunities and letting slip but few or none at all, by catching the opportunities most talked about and thus most desired, and catching them no later than others, and preferably before others. (38)

Then he shows the life of a poor people in a consumer society in following words:

> [t]he poor of a consumer society are people with no access to a normal life, let alone to a happy one. In a consumer society however, having no access to a happy or merely a normal life means to be consumers *manque’es*, or flawed consumers. And so the poor of a consumer society are socially defined, and self-defined, first and foremost as blemished, defective, faulty and deficient – in other words, inadequate – consumers. (Bauman 38)

The poor people’s inability to become a consumer in a society leads to social alienation and exclusion from aesthetic lifestyle of consumer culture. Bauman, thus, concludes emphasizing on the psychological condition of the poor:

> In a society of consumers, it is above all the inadequacy of the person as a consumer that leads to social degradation and ‘internal exile’. It is this inadequacy, this inability to acquit oneself of the consumer’s duties, that turns into bitterness at being left behind, disinherit or degraded, shut off or excluded from the social feast to which others gained entry. Overcoming that consumer inadequacy is likely to be seen as the only remedy – the sole exit from a humiliating plight. (Bauman 38)

The problem is aggravated in a poor family if the sole earner of the family becomes unemployed as it is considered demeaning to be unemployed. He becomes desperate to fulfill the needs of family especially because he turns into a faulty consumer, a tag which is more hurtful and demeaning. As money turns to be only means to survive in glossy consumer culture, for the sake of wish fulfillment he, without reconsidering much, enters a space from where escape seems to be illusory and impossible. This drastic step resulted in a breakdown of familial relationship as well as social relationship of the subject and Manjula Padmanabhan, in her play *Harvest*, poignantly portrays this collapse of human relationship in all spaces through the protagonist characters’ frustrated social condition.

The play is written in 1997 and it is set in a near future, in 2010, to project the condition of a poor family in a futuristic society of Bombay city. Om, the central protagonist character of the play, is a twenty years old young man who has recently lost job and has gone to look for a job. The opening scene shows Jaya, wife of
Om, eagerly waiting for her husband to return for lunch, looks out of the window and Ma, mother of Om, is asking about her son. The conversation between Jaya and Ma in the opening scene depicts a normal familial conversation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law with usual complaints and chidings to each other but the scene is full of warm familial relationship in contrast to the later development. The scene is important in two aspects. Firstly, Jaya has been shown as an anxious and devoted housewife waiting for her husband at lunch but she does not want her husband to get the job that clearly shows her awareness of the type of interview Om has gone for; and secondly, a mother’s warm affection and concerns for the well being of her son as well as a fretful mother-in-law, but most importantly the acceptance of present social condition and adaptability with the way of life. At the same time mother’s longing for more stable social and projected ideal harmonious familial bonding is reflected through her arguments with Jaya when Ma accuses Jaya for not cooperating with her: “Alone, alone! Have you seen your neighbours? Ten in that room, twenty in the other! And harmonious, my dear! Harmonious as a TV show! But you? An empty room would be too crowded for you!” (Padmanabhan 218). This ideal as well as ideological notion of family bonding as ‘Harmonious as a TV show’ emerges from the propagation of ideological notion of ideal daughter-in-law in many Indian TV serials where wives are portrayed as submissive, devoted, ever smiling, well behaved, docile and well cultured—an image that has become an epitome of the patriarchal symbol of suppression of women and a prominent image of a happy family in consumer culture. Though Ma is self-complacent with her present economical condition of the family but at the same time her desire as well as behaviour has been moulded in terms of projected consumerism in society which prompts her to take the liberty to lambast Jaya for waiting at the window for her husband instead of pressing her legs.

Moreover, the love, affection, concerns, accolades and anxiety for Om are reflected through behaviour of Ma after his arrival in the room. Presuming that Om has not got the job, she consoles him affectionately, “They are fools, that’s all! Don’t recognise a diamond when they see one! It’s their loss” (Padmanabhan 218) but unconsciously she reveals Om as a commodity with an use-value of ‘diamond’ in the exchange of which any company would have garnered profit and since they fail to realize the use-value of ‘diamond’ so they would have been in loss. The objectification and marketability of Om’s use value and exchange value is further emphasized in the reaction of Ma after knowing his recruitment for the job as she welcomes her with ecstasy and joy, “Oh! Say it again! Say the blessed words again! Never stop saying it! ‘I – have – got – the – job!’ Ah my soul, my heartbeat! Come, kiss me! Let me hold you, fondle your ears! Why am I surprised? You deserve every success” (Padmanabhan 219) and orders Jaya to bring two glasses of milk for Om. Though the ecstatic reaction of mother on her son’s recruitment is usual and natural, especially at the dire hour of financial need in the family, but if her earlier reaction on presuming the rejection of Om is compared to her latter reaction with outpouring affection and two glasses of milk, then it would be clear that her latter reaction is placed as an exchange value for the income or money Om is bringing at home, thereby placing Om as a commodity in dual way in the consumer market. This can be further emphasized if Jeetu, her younger son, is placed in another axis of the consumer market’s paradigm, then it can be seen that Jeetu’s use value and exchange value as a commodity, in comparison with that of Om, is, according to Ma, zero because of his inability to earn money for which she denigrates him as “jackal”, “rude, insolent, ungrateful” (Padmanabhan 218). Materialistic desire and consumer culture have not only created this binary opposition of diamond/jackal, in fact it also objectified mother’s love and affection with an exchange value for a subject (son) who has use value in the market. It is because of this commoditization of mother’s affection with exchange value that puts Jaya in the same position.
as of Jeetu. Jaya being a housewife is involved in non-salaried household chores which have no exchange value in the production of consumer market and this condition leads her to denial of Ma’s affection and love. Their desire of glittering consumer world and social mobility towards upper classes have been governed by the collective consciousness of intrinsic use value and exchange value as well as marketability of a subject which in turns affects their social and familial relationship.

Om’s description of the recruitment process and the value he will be getting shows his desire for upward social mobility by acquiring more materials and consumer products as he explains to his mother, “We’ll have more money than you and I have names for! Who’d believe there’s so much money in the world?” (Padmanabhan 219). As money is indispensable to acquire all the consumer products that are de rigueur of society, it becomes the main concern in a family for which a subject can go to any extent, especially in a desperate condition like that of Om who enters ‘faustian pact’ with an organization from a developed country, North America, that judges his intrinsic use value not for his skills rather for the marketability of his body organs which must be nourished with proper diet in hygienic condition to keep them safe and healthy—again all these notions of hygiene, safety, healthy are associated with the prevalent notion of ‘happy family’ in consumer market. The play clearly shows that appearing for the recruitment process in the transaction of body organ is not a chance rather his approach to this ‘faustian pact’ is visceral, and not logical, arising from the circumstances of desire of social mobility and increase in consumption of consumer products. His desire to assimilate in the predominant ideology and governing rule of the customs is reflected in his description of the recruitment process which, in a metaphorical mode, is similar to the operation and inculcation of prevailing ideology in subject’s mind:

Slowly moving. All the time. I couldn’t understand it . . . Somewhere there must be a place to stop, to write a form? Answer questions? But no. Just – forward, forward, forward. One person fainted but the others pushed him along. And at the corners, a sort of pipe was kept . . . [. . .] I don’t know for how long we moved. Then there was a door. Inside it was dark, like being in heaven! So cool, so fresh! I too fainted then, with pleasure, I don’t know. (Reliving his movements) I wake up to find now the ground is moving under me— [. . .] Ahead of me a man screams and cries, but we are in separate little cages now, can’t move. At one place, something comes to cover the eyes. There’s no time to think, just do. Put your arm here, get one prick, put your arm there, get another prick – pissshhh! – pissshhhh! Sit here, stand here, take your head this side, look at a light that side. On and on. Finally at the end there’s another tunnel, with pretty pictures and some music. And the sign comes: ‘RESUME CLOTHING’. I just do what I have to do. All the time, the ground keeps moving. Then at the end, the ground stops, we are back on our feet, there are steps. It must be the other side of the building. And as we come down, guards are standing there, waiting for us. And to me they say, ‘You, come – ’ And that was it! (Padmanabhan 219-220)

On one level this recruitment process reminds us of the surveillance system used in a high security prison where authority uses its power to control the lives of prisoners by making them do what they have to do without asking any question; but on another level, this also reflects the behaviour of a consumer in a society where a consumer is supposed to follow all other consumers without asking any question to maintain its social status as well as to gain social mobility but this process does not go on in repressive manner rather it is an ideological ‘interpellation’, to use the term of Louis Althusser, of the subject so that each and every consumer may desire in accordance with the consumption of other consumers, each and every consumer may behave in
social relations in terms of the way other consumers behave and each and every consumer may think in terms of what other consumers think and all these social behaviour of consumers in consumer culture are controlled by the marketability, use value and exchange value of a consumer product as well as the amount of capital invested in consumer market.

Not only the consumer behaviour is controlled but also the familial behaviour and relationship must be controlled in order to enter this consumer market as it is shown in the play. To gain that job Om has to be unmarried for which he turns his wife into his sister and Jeetu, brother-in-law of Jaya, becomes her husband, so obviously every relationship in the family has been altered. For Om, merely mentioning or changing the relationship on paper does not change the relationship at all as he has been left with no option but to grab this job for which he has to forsake the husband-wife relation, at least on paper. But what psychological impact Jaya has to undergo for this newly imposed relationship, no one bothers about that as their main concern is to acquire the bliss of materialism or consumer products:

JAYA: And calling me your sister – what’s that? If I’m your sister, what does that make you? Sister, huh! My forehead burns, when I say that word, ‘sister’!

OM: You think I did it lightly. But at the cost of calling you my sister . . . we’ll be rich! Very rich! Insanely rich! But you’d rather live in this one small room, I suppose! Think it’s such a fine thing – living day in, day out, like monkeys in a hot-case – lulled to sleep by our neighbours’ rhythmic farting! Dancing to the tune of the melodious traffic! And starving. Yes, you’d prefer this to being called my sister on a stupid slip of paper no-one we know will ever see! (Padmanabhan 223)

On the one hand, the above conversation pinpoints on the helplessness of Om in resolving the miserable financial and social conditions of his family, but on the other hand it also focuses on his willingness to become a part of the consumer market for which he has paid dearly. Ma is indifferent towards the new relationship as she is interested to know more about the ‘rich’ employer of Om, and Jeetu has got freedom to continue his extra marital affair with Jaya in more casual manner. Only Jaya shows some resistance towards it but finds herself in helpless condition in front of everyone’s materialistic pursuit.

The corrosive influence of materialistic desire and consumer culture disintegrates the whole family. The gradual dehumanizing process of Ma is not only harrowing but also an eye opening for the readers to the devastating effect of materialistic yearning. Earlier Ma is concerned of the well being of Om but later on she descends into the world of virtual reality by keeping herself engrossed with watching TV constantly. Earlier she was critical of everything in the family but later on she turns into a mute spectator and even remains indifferent when Jeetu is mistakenly taken away or returns as a blind after his eyes are taken out forcefully. Her transformation from a human being of flesh and blood to her ultra dependency on a consumer product—Super Deluxe Video Couch, an epitome of super consumer product which is self-sufficient to fulfill all sorts of need of human beings, thereby fulfilling her desire to be controlled by a virtual world where she has cocooned herself, is actually the present predicament of human beings who remain self-centered in their own virtual and imaginary world controlled by the consumer culture. It is paradoxical that consumer culture survives in controlling human beings’ desire and making them follow steps of other human beings but at the same time this same consumer product makes human beings self-complacent and self-centered in their own virtual world.
Jeetu is the only character who talks about liberty and freedom but his all talks and ideas of this bourgeois ideology goes into vain when he gains mechanical eyesight after becoming blind. Having seen the virtual reality of developed countries, he has lost all of his rational faculties. Bombarded by the sexy and alluring presentation of developed countries he shatters his ties with the family to embrace the virtual world without realizing its inherent danger and unconsciously presents himself as an object, a commodity, to be sold with exchange value but at the end what he gets can be easily understood. A deconstructive reading of the text may show the implied relationship between developing countries and developed countries, which requires a commodity/body to survive and procreate in mechanical manner, and for which it takes lots of measures in terms of safety to ensure hygienic and healthy organ; then how Jeetu is accepted as a donor of body organ as he was full of diseases and unhygienic on his return at home after two months. The question arises whether Jeetu has been taken mistakenly or intentionally to get a donor of body organ free of cost—the mechanism is simple as first take the subject forcefully, then to allure him introduce the subject to the sexuality of developed countries in the virtual world and then the subject will himself embrace this virtual world as it happens with Jeetu. Or has Jeetu’s intimidation become necessary for the developed country as he speaks about liberty and freedom which is detrimental for the growth of consumerism? Then the relationship between developed countries and Third world countries is not merely the relationship of seller-buyer rather it is more than that—to control the body of the subject of Third World countries as a mere commodity and this hoo-ha about hygiene and safety are different means to control, to allure and to objectify the subject in the name of consumer culture. If this safety and hygiene does matter to the buyer of body organs then Jeetu would have not been accepted as a donor, as what Om has said. In fact it is a neo-capitalist attitude to control not only a subject rather the whole family and that is what happened in the play. Since Jeetu is a insouciant, happy-go-lucky character, it is necessary to put him in the paradigm of consumer culture for which force or trick is essential.

Om is central character in the play and in quest of a better living condition, his ‘faustian pact’, unknowingly, puts the whole family and familial relationship at stake. Dazzled by the glittering world of consumer culture, he endlessly remains in materialistic pursuit that eludes him till the end. His character shows a rapid change in attitude and relationship. Initially after getting job, he forgets his own position in society and becomes hauteur in dealing with other people; which is evident in the episode of Bidyut-bai and his disapproval in mother’s initial generosity with neighbours. Even he is not ready to allow Jeetu at home as he returns with diseases. He is only concerned about money and Ginni: “Here I am, willing to give my whole body to improve our lives – and what’re you doing? Endangering the whole project by feeling up your brother-in-law—” (Padmanabhan 232). His hubris for proving himself having better exchange value in the market of commodity widens the gap between husband and wife. But on realizing the nature of despairing act he has been involved to, he turns into a pathetic subject and his contrition and lamentation for escape from the hopeless situation is heartrending:

How could I have done this to myself? What sort of fool am I? [ . . . ] Whoever opens that door is my murderer, my assassin – [ . . . ] No!! I beg of you – please! Please! Leave that cursed door alone! [ . . . ] (sinks to the floor) I’ll hide in the fridge. I’ll just crawl along here, all the way to the fridge and I’ll sit there, yes – (Padmanabhan 234)

The only character who has suffered a lot in the alteration of relationship in family is Jaya as she drifts between Om and Jeetu. Unable to get support and dignity of a wife from her husband, she turns to Jeetu and she is the
only one who cares about Jeetu in the family whereas Om and Ma are concerned about the reaction of Ginni. When she is not able to reverse the imposed relationship of brother-sister with her husband, she retorts to Om:

   JAYA: I’m still your wife.
   OM: On paper, you’re my sister. In reality, you’re worse than nothing to me. If not for Ginni I’d throw you out onto the streets. To be hunted. What do I care? You betrayed me. Slept with my brother.
   JAYA: You never . . . wanted me –
   OM: Wanting – not wanting – what meaning do these words have? (Padmanabhan 238)

It is Jaya who brings out the reality of this consumer market by comparing Om as a chicken which is fed only to be butchered and served as a meal:

   OM: Would she spend so much money on me, then? If I am just – a – a chicken to her? Answer me that! Do you know how much she’s spent on us?
   JAYA: Never mind chicken – have you seen how their beef cattle live? Air-conditioned! Individual potties! Music from loudspeakers – why, they even have their own psychiatrists! All to ensure that their meat, when it finally gets to Ginni’s table, will be the freshest, purest, sanest, happiest – (Padmanabhan 233).

That she realizes the bitter truth of this consumer culture and ‘neo-capitalist’ attitude of the developed countries, it is obvious that she will be chosen for the mechanized cross-breeding programme to which Jaya claims her body and sexuality to her own self by preventing the virtual sexual advance of Ginni/Vinni at the end of the play. She claims her own existence as a human being and moreover as a woman by retreating inside that room and waiting for Vinni to appear with real flesh and blood:

   And if I let you take it from me, I will be naked as well as poor! You’ll never let me have what you have, you’re only willing to share your electronic shadows with me, your ‘virtual’ touch, your plastic shadows – no! If the only clothes I can afford are these rags of pride then I’ll wear them with my head held high – (Padmanabhan 248)

In the world of dehumanizing process of consumer culture she clings to the humanitarian aspect of procreation thereby refusing to become a commodity/an object with fix use value and exchange value:

   You listen to me! I want to be left alone – truly alone. I don’t want to hear any sounds, I don’t want any disturbances. I’m going to take my pills, watch TV, have a dozen baths a day, eat for three instead of one. For the first time in my life and maybe the last time of my life, I’m going to enjoy myself, all by myself. (Padmanabhan 248-249)

Having lost all relationships within the family because of this materialistic pursuit and consumer culture, she now hopes to start a new bonding with Ginni/Vinni from developed countries which symbolically reflects to ponder over the present relationship between developed countries and developing countries like India and seeks to begin a fresh relationship with new perspective after discarding the detrimental neo-capitalist attitude of developed countries.
Manjula Padmanabhan is usually known as a social critique as through her plays she portrays the reality of society in a new perspective and *Harvest* is a step ahead than all of her plays as it is not only a critique of social reality but also goes beyond the boundaries of nation to delve into the relationship of human beings from different countries. On the one hand, this play depicts the crumbling of societal and familial relationship due to the increasing consumption of consumer products and unending materialistic pursuits of human beings; on the other hand, it also projects the operative of developed countries in the developing countries to propagate the notion of consumerism for mercenary purposes. Though the play is full of bleak images of humanity but at the end it shows a ray of hope with a hint to start every relationship anew in humanitarian ground.

**Works Cited**


