New World, No World: Seeking Utopia in Padmanabhan’s Harvest

AYESHA RAMACHANDRAN

This essay examines the theoretical and practical implications of performance as a utopian gesture, particularly with regard to postcolonial drama. Analyzing Manjula Padmanabhan’s futuristic play, Harvest, as a case study, I argue that ‘utopia’ is a crucial critical concept for postcolonial dramatic practice because it stands for the collision and convergence of aesthetic and political interests, using the body itself as a site for representation and resistance. The play explores the extreme outcome of the international trade in human organs as a metaphor for neocolonialism and the constraints of postcolonial societies rent apart by economic inequalities. In this, it presents a moment of personal moral reckoning as a paradigmatic marker for an entire culture’s confrontation with its utopian desires and their consequences. Harvest reflects the utopian impulse of modern drama masked by dystopic expression: it demands a differently imagined and shaped future, even as it chronicles the collapse of utopian visions in absolutist excess.

Thenceforth, all flesh
had to be sown with salt,
to feel the edge of seasons,
fear and harvest,
joy that was difficult,
but was, at least, his own.

Derek Walcott, ‘New World’

‘How can performance, in itself, be a utopian gesture?’ asks Jill Dolan in a provocative article entitled, ‘Performance, Utopia and the “Utopian Performative”’, and it is this question that provides the pretext for my essay.¹ There have been several recent attempts to locate the appeal of performance in its ability ‘to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other’. It appears that performance is therefore driven by a utopian motive, an ability to ‘articulate a common future, one that’s more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture’.² However, as Richard Dyer argues, this utopianism is not a political blueprint for the solution of social ills. Instead, performance ‘presents... what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized’ (my italics).³ These affective descriptions of the utopian impulse in performance by two widely influential theorists participate in a deeply conflicted critical discourse on the nature and desirability of utopias and utopian thought. Dolan and
Dyer implicitly effect a key distinction between ‘experiences of utopia’ or the ‘utopian sensibility’ offered by theatre or performance art and the menacing specters of fascist regimes based on utopian philosophies.\(^4\) In this way, they attempt to rehabilitate the term ‘utopia’ by removing it from its chequered history as a political ideology, and adapting the emotional power of its idealistic vision for strategies of aesthetic resistance. Though we must welcome this gesture, particularly as it reaffirms the powerful transformative potential of the theatre, I want to suggest that the political and affective consequences of performance as a utopian gesture cannot be, and indeed, must not be, disentangled.\(^5\)

The utopian appeal of performance lies in its ability to produce a powerful feeling of harmony and resolution.\(^6\) Dyer anatomizes the ‘utopian sensibility’ into five distinct categories – energy, abundance, intensity, transparency and community – which (he notes) correspond to George Kateb’s identification of the dominant motifs in western utopian tradition.\(^7\) Performance, it seems, fulfils social needs by providing these heightened communal experiences that are not possible in the world outside the theatre; it offers a microcosmic, fleeting experience of utopian unity and accord.\(^8\) However, this affective desire for a harmonious community – to experience what such a community would feel like – is also a political desire with possibly far-reaching consequences. This political dimension of utopia has been most evident in its darker twentieth-century incarnations. The so-called ‘utopian experiments’ – attempts to restructure the social order according to utopian ideals of collectivization, homogeneity and perfect organization in historical time – led to the Russian Revolution and the rise of Nazi Germany, whose aftermaths have forced a re-evaluation and revision of utopian discourse. Thus, in the work of philosophers such as Karl Mannheim, Ernst Bloch, Adorno and Horkheimer, Robert Nozick and literary critics such as Frederic Jameson, ‘utopia’ has been re-imagined as a dialectic between the urge towards community, identity and stability (which involve absolutism, order and possibly stagnation) and the desire for privacy, diversity and change (with the accompanying possibilities of creative incoherence and disorder).\(^9\) But, within the context of a specific performance, how does the individual expression of actors coexist harmoniously – and indeed, even produce – the utopian community of spectators and performers? And what happens when the affective utopia-effect of the performance event coincides with an explicit topical interest in utopia as a form of socio-political order?

This convergence lies at the heart of much postcolonial drama, where the emotional temptation of the utopian vision collides with the fear of its political consequences. If ‘utopia’ as a concept represents both the convergence of aesthetic and political impulses, if it becomes the figural site where critical explorations of the relationship between art and politics can coalesce, it may be time to understand the utopian gesture of performance in both affective and politico-historic terms. This essay seeks to examine what these theoretical intersections – between utopia and performance, between emotional response and political consequence, between artistic desire and social reality – might look like in dramatic practice. As a case study, I take Manjula Pandamanabhan’s *Harvest*, winner of the 1997 inaugural Onassis Prize for Theatre, a futuristic play drawing on a long tradition of dystopic writing that almost paradoxically reveals and reaffirms performance as a utopian gesture. The play uniquely engages the theoretical questions I have been raising
by focusing its attention on the acting body at the centre of utopian transformations. As an artistic instrument and a political actor, the body itself becomes a site of resistance, reclamation and transformation; it is the vector containing the promise of socio-political improvement and an indicator of its often-terrifying costs.

Some theoretical reflections: why revisit utopia?

It has long been argued that the state of utopia is incompatible with the concept of drama because it represents a static, harmonic perfection that leaves no room for the conflict so essential to classical dramatic action. However, the affective/political axes of meaning that I have described within the critical usage of the term, point to the inherent dynamism of utopias. With its fundamental etymological ambivalence, utopia has always denoted the twin-concepts of eutopia (good place) and outopia (no place) simultaneously, and thereby yoked together spatial and existential ideas. Oscillating between the possibility of ‘impossibly or extravagantly ideal conditions in respect of politics, customs, [and] social organizations’ and ‘imaginary or chimerical, visionary perfection’ (Oxford English Dictionary) utopia is the dream of a perfect world, a vision of improvement, but is also, perhaps inevitably, an escapist fantasy, an impracticable, non-existent ideal. The curious status of utopian worlds emerge not only from their seemingly complete difference with regard to the present historical moment, but from the almost paradoxical means by which their very difference identifies them as important commentaries upon the present condition of the world. Thomas More’s paradigmatic book, Utopia, describes a fictional world that simultaneously satirizes actual political conditions and imagines an ideal possibility. It has since become a generic term for a series of alternate spaces – imaginary, fictional or performative – wherein improved versions of actual communities may be explored, and a term used to describe the political theories that project and strive towards these perfect societies. Thus, utopia does not merely represent a specific imaginary space, but has come to stand for a more general impulse towards the creation of an ideal society in an imagined place and time.

This condition of utopian space is theorized most influentially by Louis Marin in Utopics:

Utopia is thus the neutral moment of a difference, the space outside of place; it is a gap impossible either to inscribe on a geographic map or to assign to history. Its reality thus belongs to the order of the text . . . Utopia is not a topography but a topic. 

Marin’s formulation explains succinctly how a fictional space can slide into being and representing a series of relationships – utopia is a liminal category, best understood as a rhetorical figure that articulates the connections between apparently different, irreconcilable and binary positions such as those of self and other, male and female, native and alien, colonizer and colonized, and other oppositions that seek to demarcate different worlds of experience. But, if utopia is the concept that holds together these binaries, it is also the concept that contains the contradiction of existence and
non-existence: we can experience what utopia ‘would feel like’ but we cannot inhabit utopia without violating the delicate balance of its paradoxes.

Michel Foucault draws upon these unique spatial and historical aspects of utopia to introduce a new term:

Utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that form the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted . . . between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience.\(^{12}\)

This concept of the heterotopia as an ‘effectively enacted utopia’ usefully distinguishes it from the unattainability of the utopian ideal. More importantly, it suggests that some aspect of the utopian ideal may in fact already be inscribed in the ‘counter-sites’ of the present, historical world. One of these counter-sites identified by Foucault is the theatre itself.\(^{13}\)

It is not surprising to find in Dolan’s experiential, affective descriptions of the ‘utopian performative’ the seeds of a heterotopic conception of the performing space. A similar sentiment emerges in Girish Karnad’s reflections on his first experience of the theatre in Bombay:

One of the first things I did in Bombay was to go and see a play, which happened to be Strindberg’s Miss Julie directed by the brilliant young Ebrahim Alkazi . . . . I felt as though I had been put through an emotionally or even physically painful rite of passage. I had read some Western playwrights in college, but nothing had prepared me for the power and violence I experienced that day. By the norms I had been brought up on, the very notion of laying bare the inner recesses of the human psyche like this for public consumption seemed obscene. What impressed me as much as the psychological cannibalism of the play was the way lights faded in and out on stage. Until we moved to the city, we had lived in houses lit by hurricane lamps. Even in the city, electricity was something we switched on and off. The realization that there were instruments called dimmers that could gently fade the lights in or out opened a whole new world of magical possibilities . . . I have often wondered whether it wasn’t that evening that, without actually being aware of it, I decided I wanted to be a playwright.\(^{14}\)

Karnad’s recollection of the evening strikingly merges dramatic plot and performance in language that evokes ritual, nostalgia and future prospects. He is almost unaccountably moved and transformed by the experience and, in this passage, we can perhaps identify Dyer’s five categories of utopian sensibility. Was the experience of the play a painful rite of passage because of the violence of Strindberg’s tale, or because of the rich fascination of the dimmers which open ‘a whole new world of magical possibility’ while conjuring the hurricane lamps of a whole world past? And why does a prominent Indian playwright identify this moment as a kind of primal scene for his own development as a dramatist, a moment which entwines the psychic power of the drama’s topic along with the details of its topography? The paradoxes enunciated as triumphantly enabling
in this passage encapsulate several themes that I want to assemble around the concept of utopia: the idea of historical simultaneity, the containment of apparent contradiction, the encouragement of hope in an ideal, the yoking together of immediate context and transcendent vision and finally, the perfection of the art work itself, whose language and performance itself constitutes the utopian gesture.\footnote{15} Not surprisingly then, the drama can take on distinctly utopian functions, particularly in postcolonial contexts. As a fictive ‘other’ for the unfolding dramas of ‘real’ societies, the space of the stage is itself utopian – it is both a ‘good place’, where conflicts may be purged and resolved, as well as the chimerical ‘no place’, where nothing ‘really’ happens. It is both concrete and fleeting, affecting transformation and yet impermanent, irretrievable.\footnote{16} However, this spate of theoretical associations begs an important pragmatic question: how are these paradoxes to be articulated in performance?

**Performing utopia: reconsidering the body politic**

If the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organization.

Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Inscriptions and Body Maps’\footnote{17}

Within the various critical discourses of performance theory, the body has been treated as both a topic and a topography – a subject that represents and is represented, but also a space, a ‘surface of events’,\footnote{18} a screen upon which ‘fears and curiosities, sublimated fascinations with the strange or “primitive” are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images’.\footnote{19} The canonization of ‘the Body’ as a field worthy of extended critical discourse is only underlined by its inclusion in Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins’s survey of the theory and practice of postcolonial drama, which awards it an entire subsection entitled ‘Body Politics’.\footnote{20} But if the body is understood as a political subject, object and space, then may it not be a ‘counter-site’ as well? And is it not the very means by which performance becomes a utopian gesture?

Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest* investigates this very effect of the performing body as heterotopia and foregrounds its ability to combine the affective and political consequences of utopian desire. Set in some future time when scientific technology has advanced far enough to enable the apparently endless prolongation of human life by body-transplants, the play explores the extreme outcome of the international trade in human organs as a metaphor for neocolonialism. The thinly veiled political allegory of the plot sets up a contrast between an impoverished India and the wealthy West and carefully highlights the terrible constraints of a postcolonial society rent apart by economic hardship. As a dramatic fiction, *Harvest* participates in a long tradition of dystopias, which express the political desire for a utopian condition while almost paradoxically tracing the collapse of utopian promise when taken to socio-political extremes.\footnote{21} As a performance-event, however, it attempts to evoke a utopian sensibility even as it chronicles a steady descent into violence and despair.

Poverty-stricken and jobless, Om is driven to sell his body to the InterPlanta corporation, which specializes in selecting and handsomely paying ‘Donors’ in third-world
countries to be future sources of biological raw material for ‘Receivers’ in first world countries. Om’s contract enables his family, consisting of his mother (Ma), wife (Jaya) and brother (Jeetu), to move from dire poverty and hunger to unimaginable affluence – the utopian ideal in most economically under-developed postcolonial nations – until he is called upon by the merciless guards and agents of the sinister corporation to redeem his pledge. He must give up the body he has exchanged for the wealth he now enjoys and does not want to give up. It is a moment of moral reckoning that tests individual courage and humanity, a moment that becomes a paradigmatic marker for an entire culture’s confrontation with its utopian desires and their consequences.

Can the (utopian) state of universal economic prosperity – the desire of all postcolonial societies and the subject of their economic policies – be attained without the seemingly inevitable moral, social and human costs that the play chronicles? While this is a key question in debates over globalization, liberalization and other developmental models, its framing in terms of utopian desire at the interpersonal level changes the traditional macroeconomic terms of the debate itself. Padmanabhan does not merely use the global organ-trade as a ‘compelling metaphor through which to dramatize the West’s exploitation of its cultural Others’, but subjects the concept of exchanging bodies to rigorous examination, going well beyond the conventional science-fiction trope of body-snatching. What makes *Harvest* a particularly troubling account of neo-imperial domination is its interest in the nuances of the body-trade as a complex metaphor for socio-economic exchange. The voluntary complicity of both parties involved initiates a necessary, if uncomfortable, interrogation of the native Receivers’ responsibility for their own corruption and decay.

The central contrast of the play lies in the professions that the brothers Om and Jeetu choose. Om signs a contract with InterPlanta, pledging his body as a commodity in the international market for healthy organs, while Jeetu is a prostitute who sells sexual pleasure in return for money, commercializing his own body in a local market for physical gratification. In effect, both men are engaged in the same activity, using their bodies as currency in an economy in which physical utility is the only criteria of value. There is, however, a crucial difference. When Jaya tries to convince Jeetu to give up his socially undesirable profession, he lashes back with a brutal demystification of Om’s fêted ‘job’:

**JAYA** You don’t need to sell yourself anymore. There’ll be enough money in the house now!
**JEETU** But not for me –
**JAYA** Yes – for all of us. For the whole building –
**JEETU** No. I don’t mind being bought – but I won’t be owned!

...  
**JAYA** But why? When there’s enough money for all of us?
**JEETU** Because no employer pays his staff to do as they please. At least when I sell my body, I decide which part of me goes into where and whom! But it’s the money in the end, isn’t it? My poor brother. Thought he was so pure. But he’s like everyone else after all! Only as pure as the price of his rice.

(I. 3)
In Jeetu’s recognition of the similarity between his own body-trade and his brother’s contract, at the moment when he denies that very resemblance, Padmanabhan astutely investigates the similarity between sexual and economic exchange, particularly as they govern relationships of domination and subordination. Jeetu articulates a sophisticated understanding of the difference between the ownership of bodies and the purchase of labor, that is, the difference between slavery and employment. The problem, however, is that the two look strangely alike – Jaya evidently cannot differentiate between the two activities. But Jeetu’s apparent freedom is also revealed as enslavement to an illusory ideal – later in the play, when he crashes into the Prakash household, diseased and covered with sores, he will claim that he is dying of an overdose of freedom. Similarly, the organ market (a new slave-trade) is as much about sexual possession as it is about economic exchange: at the end of the play, the first-world Receiver, Virgil, reveals that the ultimate desire of the receivers is to impregnate Donor-women and perpetuate their own race.23

The exchange of bodies for money and for sex becomes a forceful means of exploring the similarities and differences between the Donors and Receivers, or the natives and would-be colonizers. As the action unfolds, the symmetry of choice between Jeetu and Om renders them doubles for each other, and reveals them to be sexual rivals for Jaya. But the fraternal conflict over the sexual possession of Jaya’s body is incestuous and sterile. For the purposes of his InterPlanta contract, Om pretends that he is Jaya’s brother, while Jeetu (his brother) is Jaya’s husband. This substitution is the first sign of the social dysfunction precipitated by InterPlanta, but Padmanabhan is too astute to lay all the blame with the neocolonial global corporation. Instead, InterPlanta’s demands only bring to the fore tensions and problems already inherent in the Prakash household: Jaya, we soon learn, has been in love with her brother-in-law Jeetu who is also her clandestine lover, a fact suspected by her mother-in-law and unknown to her sexually timid husband, Om. This sexual body-swapping within the Prakash household, suggestive of the collapse of individual identity and difference in the Donor culture, is underscored when InterPlanta’s agents mistake Jeetu for Om and carry him off for a forcible organ transplant while Om hides in the bathroom. When Jeetu returns having given up his eyes, he is seduced into giving up his entire body by Gini, an electronic simulacra, broadcast by the Receiver, Virgil. As he had earlier exchanged affluence for the bitter pleasures of freedom and sexual control, Jeetu now exchanges his real body for the illusion of a ‘computer animated wet dream’.24 There is no difference it seems, between the elusive dream of ‘freedom’ and the illusion of sexual pleasure. Perhaps more disturbingly, freedom resembles sexual pleasure in its fleetingness and promise of fulfilment; throughout the play, sexuality is the only way of asserting the particularity of individual need – it is the utopian gesture of this dramatic world.

It is worth pausing here to reflect on how the dramaturgical elements of the play establish these symbolic substitutions in performance. The most striking performative feature of the play is the severe dichotomy between the bodiless North American (Virgil/Ginni) and the emphatically embodied Indians (Om, Jeetu, Jaya). For much of the play, the Receiver’s presence is represented by Ginni, the electronic simulacra projected onto the globe-like ‘contact module’. She is, in fact, an image of cinematic distance and desire, ‘a young woman’s face, beautiful in a youthful, glamorous First World manner’
(p. 223), who typifies, for the impoverished Indians, the unattainable politico-economic utopia of North America. Indeed, both Om and Ma are instantly smitten by her; in a gesture of almost ludicrous excess that emphasizes the utopian longing at the heart of the play, Ma simply gasps, ‘I see an angel’ (p. 224). But we must understand Ginni herself as a heterotopia within this particular dramatic world; she is nothing more than light projected onto inert space. The module within which she exists creates a (counter)site of virtual reality within the theatrical space while acting as a security camera, video-conferencing system and listening device. The virtual reality offered by technology thus becomes an onstage meta-theatrical symbol, constantly reminding the audience of the seductiveness of utopian idealism, the strength of its psychological influence, and the tragedy of its fundamental immateriality. As the play progresses, the stage itself becomes cluttered with new gadgets – the console, the lights, the pills, the astonishing sarcophagus-like VideoCouch into which Ma disappears – so that the original space of performance becomes layered with the debris of a virtual world that systematically effaces tactile presence.

Another version of this technological dehumanization unfolds between the brothers, Om and Jeetu, who act as doubles for each other. They are deliberately kept apart and never seen together onstage until the second act in which the rapid substitutions take place. When Jeetu returns to the Prakash household, ‘his clothes in tatters, his hair wild and covered in solid muck and grime’ (p. 230) he presents a stark contrast to the pristine hygiene of Om who wants to push him back out on to the streets as soon as possible. Jeetu’s haggard, scabbed body disturbs the comfortably glossy, anodyne surface of the futuristic household, forcing Om (and the audience) to confront the grimy corporeality of the present. Ironically, it is this body, the ‘health catastrophe’ of Jeetu that is the play’s true focus: its increasing disfigurement reflects the steady decay of individual freedom and familial bonds. Jeetu returns from his forcible eye-donation to InterPlanta wearing an enormous pair of goggles. In a grotesque parody of pornographic pleasure, Jeetu is seduced by the virtual projection of a naked Ginni through his ‘new’ goggle-eyes. But as Jaya sadly notes, he is chasing an illusion, ‘But ... it’s not real, what you see – I – I mean, we could watch you moving like a madman, waving your arms about, pointing to things that weren’t there’ (p. 241). The episode is especially poignant in performance: the spectacle of a blind man chasing an image only he can see, ‘behaving as though he is standing very close to someone, following her around as she moves out of his reach’ (p. 241), moving his body seductively, mimicking the gestures of sexual arousal and finally looking forward to the body-transplant. There is a dark irony in this acceptance: death is masked by the promise of sexual release, and even Om, who knows exactly what is in store, yearns for his brother’s apparent success.

The beguilement of the brothers is inverted and replayed in the final act, when Virgil dons Jeetu’s body and attempts to entice and impregnate Jaya virtually. As the dizzying series of bodily substitutions reaches its dystopic limit, Harvest raises serious questions about personal identity and foregrounds anxieties over sexuality and paternity as determinants of socio-economic structures. Presented with the spectacle of Virgil-in-Jeetu’s body and the chance to fulfil her longing to have a child, Jaya is bewildered but wary:
Jaya Please – oh, it’s madness you’re offering me.

Virgil Is it madness to offer you your heart’s desire?

Jaya I had stopped hoping –

Virgil You can start again. I am here to make it possible.

Jaya But whose child would it be? Jeetu’s? Or . . . yours?

Virgil This is Jittoo’s body!

Jaya Yes but –

Virgil It would belong to this body – Jittoo’s body.

Jaya But would it be Jeetu’s child? Would it look like him? Have his voice?

(III.2)

The elision of physical appearance and individual identity (a ‘sense of self’) in a materialist conception of the body makes it almost impossible for Jaya to articulate her horror at seeing Virgil in Jeetu’s body and contemplating sexual intercourse with this composite unidentifiable being. In this exchange between Virgil and Jaya, Padmanabhan delicately leaves the most important issues unspoken: Virgil understands perfectly well that Jaya is in the difficult philosophic and pragmatic position of distinguishing the ontological status of the body from the self.

Named for the great Roman poet, Virgil is both a virtual simulacra and the unseen power behind the social and economic negotiations that tear apart the Prakash household. As a metaphor, he represents an even broader force – the powerful nexus between artistic and political power. Quite literally, he embodies the potency of great fictions and their place in the establishment of cultural myths and social hierarchies. And it is Virgil, would-be colonizer, poet of Empire, and the play’s most monstrous hybrid, a colonizer in a native body, who holds out to Jaya the utopian promise of fulfilled desire. Of course, Virgil’s temptation and exploitation of Jaya’s most secret hope only seems like the promise of utopian satisfaction; in effect, what he offers is to enter another body. As he tells Jaya in an earlier passage, ‘We [the Receivers] look for young men’s bodies to live in and young women’s bodies in which to sow their children –’ (p. 246). The agricultural, deliberately asexual, metaphors of sowing and harvesting mask the perversion of sexuality itself in the brave new world of InterPlanta. Bodily penetration is no longer associated with sex and reproduction, but with the endless prolongation of life through technology. The taint of sexuality must be removed in order to erase the spectre of mortality.

In the (post)colonial situation of Harvest, the body loses its privileged ontological status and becomes the overdetermined space within which the colonial drama unfolds. The primary action of the play consists in exploring what it means to ‘live in’ a body as the body loses its existential power and is reduced to a spatial locus, a territory that may be inhabited by different tenants. The parallels to the documented practices of imperialism – slavery, fetishism, cannibalism, objectification – are all evoked in this arc of defamiliarization. But the play complicates conventional discourses, which seek to understand such practices in terms of simple binary relations. By presenting the monster medley of colonizer and colonized, Padmanabhan powerfully conflates the binaries through which power is theorized and renders the body itself the site for staging utopian resistance – to return to Marin’s terms, the body in Harvest is ‘a space outside of place,
impossible to inscribe on a geographic map or to assign to history.’ And yet, as the action reminds us by its constant allusions to the history of imperial oppression, the body has become a symbolic geography and history, a heterotopia that mirrors – and simultaneously defies – the collapse of humane relationships in the brutal rush towards socio-economic utopias.

In his insightful study of the utopian impulse in modern drama, Dragan Klaic suggests that in a strange paradox, theatre can only ‘express utopian striving via a dystopian vision’ because:

Dystopia is a fundamentally polemical vision. Shocking as it maybe in its prediction of things to come, it also implies possible alternatives – even begs for them, issuing a warning, an alarm and a call for a differently imagined and shaped future, in opposition to the worst case scenarios projected in the plays.²⁵

Dystopian dramaturgy masks utopian longing and thus its performance becomes a utopian gesture both fictionally and meta-theatrically. It is this paradox between utopian vision and dystopian expression that provides the twist at the end of Harvest, as Padmanabhan closes the action with the demand for ‘possible alternatives.’ Presented with a golden handcuff, an offer that seems to be an ideal combination of economic and sexual gratification, Jaya’s response defies all the careful plans and expectations of Virgil – refusing the illusion of virtual sex, she demands real physical contact in return for satisfying Virgil’s desire to reproduce:

**JAYA** You’re not here! Jeetu’s dead and I’m alone –

**VIRGIL** I can set it up so that we can be together, go places, anywhere you want – right inside your room –

**JAYA** I don’t want your make-believe travels! . . . I want real hands touching me! I want to feel a real weight upon me!

**VIRGIL** And it’s all possible –

**JAYA** No! Not without risking your skin! Never! Do you hear me, whoever you are, wherever you are? Never! Never! NEVER! There is no closeness without risk!

(III.2)

Here, Jaya breaks through her earlier confusion about sexual and economic exchange to see clearly what she is being offered. She must re-enact the choice of Jeetu; only, she revises it with unflinching courage. 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. Her demand for Virgil’s physical presence is not only a demand for real sexual pleasure, but a demand that Virgil accept his own mortality. It is a philosophical cry to battle against the dualist conception of mind and body that opens avenues for exploitation. In this, Jaya celebrates embodiment, corporeality, and the gritty, hard-won but deeply humane pleasures of a mortal life. By insisting that Virgil risk his skin (even though it is, in fact, Jeetu’s skin), she repudiates the Receivers’ reconception of the body-as-space and returns to an integral sense of the material body with a particular identity; she rejects the erasure of difference that the enslaving practice of body-swapping encourages, and reinvests the body with dignity.
and individual uniqueness. In other words, Jaya reclaims the objectified body as a subject (in all senses of the term) as her right.

Virgil is of course appalled by Jaya’s suggestion because, as he explains, ‘The environment you live in is too polluted for me.’ This theme of pollution and the danger of contamination emphasizes Virgil’s link to the Prakash brothers, Om and Jeetu. Of course, Virgil is literally worried that the lower standards of hygiene and sanitation (an obsession for various characters in the play) will make him physically ill and endanger the success of his body-transplant. However, the fear of pollution also alludes to the colonial fear of contact and contamination with the natives. To use Homi Bhabha’s terms, it reveals the fear of a reverse mimicry by which the apparent similarity between colonizer and native threatens to erase difference. The game that Virgil and the Receivers play is thus a dangerous one: they need to erase the subjectivity of the Donors in order to use their bodies, but at the same time, they have to retain their own particular subjectivities while using the body of the physically colonized Other. Jaya’s demand that Virgil upset the balance by eliminating the space (both symbolic and physical) between them, so that she can ‘feel a real weight upon me’, is a demand for recognition as an equal subject, worthy of being dignified by the acknowledgement of her particularity. It is also a potent command to the would-be colonizer to let go of the dangerously pleasurable fantasy of sexually possessing the exotic Other and repopulating the colonized land, in favour of the dangers, risks and always painful pleasures of true engagement. In this, Jaya issues a challenge to defy the ghosts of miscegenation, hybridity and racial pollution.

But in a play full of economic metaphors and sexual substitutions, the call to such cultural and personal self-awareness must be bought at a price: Jaya retains an integral selfhood and can command respect only as she threatens to destroy the slim possibility for a brighter future. Ironically, Jaya too, like Jeetu before her, is chasing an image; she remains alone on stage talking to a disembodied voice so that final movements of the play become a one-woman performance. When Virgil insists that Jaya cannot resist him and cannot effectively make any demands, she responds with a desperate courage that reveals the utopian power of performance itself:

\[ \text{Jaya} \]  You can’t see me can you? I’m holding a piece of glass against my throat. If you force the door, you will push this glass into my throat.

\[ \text{Virgil} \]  Zhaya – please! We’ve got this far – I love your spirit – I really do. In these months and weeks, I have come to admire you and care for you. Don’t let me down now!

\[ \ldots \]

\[ \text{Jaya} \]  I’m bored of this argument! Don’t you understand? This game is over! Either you have to erase me and start again or \ldots you must accept a new set of rules.

(III.2)

Death lurks at the margins throughout the play, but for the first time, we are forced to face it directly onstage. As Jaya holds a glass shard against her throat, threatening to push it in, her living, performing body becomes the screen for our shock. Selfhood is clearest
in the moment of its destruction, and by recognizing the necessity of endangering its existence in order to emphasize its importance, Jaya reveals exactly what is at stake in the shift from past habits of hierarchy to possible future relations of equality.

Describing her vision of the intersection between utopia and theatre, Anna Deavere Smith uses words that could describe Jaya’s condition at the end of *Harvest*:

> The utopian theatre would long for flesh, blood and breathing. It would be hopelessly old-fashioned in a technical sense, hopelessly interested in presence, hopelessly interested in modes of communication, requiring human beings to be in the same room at the same time . . . the utopian theatre finds a place for ease inside of riddles, inside of paradoxes, inside of disturbing realities. The utopian theatre does not believe in mind over matter.\(^7\)

Smith’s emphasis on *presence*, the presence of live performance where actors and spectators inhabit the same space, and briefly, share the same world, speaks to Jaya’s desire for such a community of shared experience within her own (fictional) world. Both acts – the performance of *Harvest* and the performance within *Harvest* – are political, utopian gestures. Dolan notes that ‘live performance promotes a necessary and moving confrontation with mortality. The actor’s willing vulnerability perhaps enables our own and prompts us toward compassion and greater understanding . . . [Anna Deavere] Smith’s work spurs political action by reminding us, perhaps, that however differently we live, our common, flesh-full cause is that in performance, we’re dying together.’ Smith’s vision of the theatre is Jaya’s vision of her world. Her threat to kill herself attains that longed-for utopian wholeness only in the instant that she seriously threatens to annihilate it; her confrontation with death precipitates the audience’s confrontation with its mortality. In the uncertainty of that moment, at which the play carefully concludes, a precarious balance is established. Through this final insistence on the unity of body, mind and identity, Jaya issues a call to arms; here, affective and political consequences become one, and the play achieves its most triumphantly utopian gesture.

**NOTES**

2. Ibid.
5. By claiming that Dolan and Dyer primarily view the utopian element of performance in affective terms, I am not suggesting that their work or its aims are apolitical. If anything, Dolan’s article powerfully describes how affective transformation paves the way to political rethinking, and hence participates in effecting socio-political change (a desire that is utopian in itself, as she acknowledges). However, both Dolan and Dyer subtly distance their reflections on utopia from the long, dark history of utopia as political ideology – the failure of Marxist and socialist utopias for instance, or the utopian notions underlying the tenets of fascism and absolutism of various kinds. While this is undoubtedly necessary if we are to reclaim the power of the utopian ideal, I would argue that it is also a dangerous avoidance of an ideological history that informs much theatre today, and particularly the political consciousness of postcolonial drama, the subject of my essay here.
Dolan describes the achievement of this harmony in performance as the moment when ‘something “works”’... when the magic of theatre appears, when the pace, the expression, the gesture, the emotion, the light, the sound, the relationship between actor and actor, and actors and spectators, all meld into something alchemical, something nearly perfect in how it communicates in that instance’ (p. 458).

Dolan emphasizes the communal experience of performance and the ephemerality of utopian experience (‘Performance’, pp. 455–8).


Ibid., p. 25.


Klaic, The Plot of the Future; Klaic, ‘Utopia Sustained’.


Gilbert and Tompkins describe the effects of the intersection of race and gender in the colonial desire to sexually possess and impregnate the body of the female Other. See Gilbert and Tompkins, Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics, pp. 212–21.

Padmanabhan, Harvest, p. 246. (Page numbers are hereafter indicated parenthetically in the text.)

Ayesha Ramachandran is a doctoral candidate in English and Renaissance Studies at Yale University. She has co-authored The Mercenary Issue at the UN Commission on Human Rights: The Need for a New Approach (International Alert, 2001). Her dissertation, entitled 'A Rage for Order: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Literature and Philosophy' explores the development of 'the world' as a key-word and conceptual category over the course of the long seventeenth century.