

## No Nation for Women: Critiquing Dystopic Gender Dynamics in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*

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### Abstract

The onset of the Holocene epoch has always been accelerated by a multitude of hedonistic practices. Utopian world is a non-existent or imagined world that stirs the contrasting images of its other side of coin i.e. dystopia by channelising our thoughts of 'Imagined Communities' (as per Benedict Anderson's development of his study in 1983). Delving further into the intricacies of dystopian fiction, we begin to see the genre's ability to unveil deeper truths about our own world. It goes beyond mere entertainment and forces us to confront uncomfortable realities with dismantling the concept of 'Hedonism'.

This paper will endeavour to explore how Manjula Padmanabhan in her remarkable fiction *Escape* shows gender-roles are societal constructs that enslave men and women in a hierarchical structure by offering the privilege of those in position of money and power in an attempt to bring about self-awakening to give voice to the oppressed women in a dystopic land through the representation of the Meiji, a fallen woman. This work functions as a mechanism to sustain the brutal exploitation of women and reflect, actively engage with, and attempt to shape the immediate social, political, and economic aspects of the times. It also serves as a ray of hope for individuals whose voices are muted in the reign of authoritarian dictatorship. The intent of this paper is to examine the discourse around gender dystopia and how it has shaped the postcolonial discourses.

**Keywords:** Dystopia, Escape, Gender, Patriarchy, Feminine

Speculative literature can be a possible medium by which one can investigate and explore oneself as well as the world outside to know about its circumstances and existing condition. Delving further into the intricacies of dystopian fiction, we begin to see the genre's ability to unveil deeper truths about our own world. It goes beyond mere entertainment and forces us to confront the uncomfortable realities. By exploring extreme exaggerations, dystopian stories shed light on the flaws and vulnerabilities of our own so called 'totalitarian' society. The goal of the discursive genre like dystopian fiction is to produce a conceptualization model in the reader through the consumption of cultural products such as movies, television shows, and literary texts. Ideally, this will enable readers to critically assess their own socio-political situations. As a result, dystopian fiction, which is a fictitious discourse, seeks to influence socio-political change by interfering with non-fictional discourse.

If we conduct massive reading of select, remarkable dystopian writings of the last century, women writers have seldom contributed to the dystopian genre though this literary space is known to offer females a virtual avenue to question and challenge the prevailing ideology put forward by men. Feminist dystopia has emerged as a doubly oppositional genre, simultaneously critiquing the deeply entrenched male-centric ethos of society and the predominant masculine presence and assumptions governing the dystopian genre itself. The

genre provides a fertile ground for feminist writers to explore the potential for their eventual liberation in a dynamic sociopolitical and cultural landscape.

Western dystopian fiction frequently addresses issues with societal injustice, technology breakthroughs, and the fallout from unbridled authority. It has a long history of examining issues including insurrection, political control, and the apocalyptic effects of social and technological advancement. These fictions have affected mainstream society, moulding the public's insight and comprehension of oppressed world. Popular culture has been shaped by Western dystopian narratives, which in turn have shaped the understanding and perception of dystopia. While western dystopian fiction occupies its world-wide expansion, Indian dystopian fiction being a rising literary genre characterized by social injustice, oppression, discrimination, cast prejudices, female foeticide, loss of individuality and economic inequality, mirrors the graphical representation of Indian context. Indian dystopian fiction excavates intersectionality of ideas like environmental catastrophe, topsy-turvy societies, corruption, gender, Indian mythology and folklore.

Gender representation in dystopian literature serves as a rich and multifaceted terrain for exploring societal norms, power dynamics, and forms of resistance. Through an interdisciplinary lens that integrates literary theory, feminist criticism, and sociocultural analysis, this study delves into how authors construct and deconstruct gender roles, stereotypes, and power dynamics within their narratives. The analysis begins by examining the construction of gender in dystopian societies, where patriarchal structures often dominate and women are relegated to subordinate positions. These narratives reflect and reinforce traditional gender norms, portraying a dystopian vision where gender serves as a tool for social control and domination. However, amidst the pervasive oppression, the study uncovers threads of resistance and subversion woven into the narratives. Female protagonists emerge as agents of change, challenging the status quo and advocating for autonomy and equality. By foregrounding the experiences of marginalized individual, Padmanabhan underscores the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression and the importance of intersectional analysis in understanding gender dynamics.

Prof. B. Parvathi asserts that

“Manjula Padmanabhan belongs to that generation of Indian women writers in English who have boldly stepped out of conventions that define respectability to address issues of gender, woman, her body and its behavior, its exploitation in a family and social setting..... Manjula Padmanabhan has opened a fresh dialogue on a new angle of feminist concerns” (Parvathi 136-147)

At the heart of many dystopian narratives lies a complex interplay of power, control, and rebellion, with gender representation serving as a central axis around which these themes revolve. In dystopian societies, gender roles are often rigidly defined and enforced, reflecting and reinforcing patriarchal norms and hierarchies. Women are frequently relegated to subordinate positions, their bodies and identities subject to regulation and control by oppressive regimes or societal structures

Manjula Padmanabhan stands out among prominent Indo-Anglian writers because of her unwavering commitment to expressing an artist's perspective on current societal issues. Padmanabhan is a genderist. She writes about gender discrimination in her literary piece. In an interview given to Rachna Pandey, she states,

" Women participate in gender discrimination too. For instance, the preference for having sons and being extremely respectful towards the men in the family and bringing up their sons to be disrespectful towards women. All of these are the forms of gender discrimination that women practice. In my view, women need to examine their contribution to discrimination against their sex as one of many steps towards creating a more caring and compassionate society".

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) is a dystopian narrative which follows the setting of an anonymous land that is nearly devoid of women. The narrative of the novel centres around Meiji, a little child, and her father, Youngest, who took care of her after they fled the Indian subcontinent during a civil war that culminated into a violent, planned genocide of all women. She struggles to realize what it means to be a woman because she was born and brought up in a society that does not recognize women and her caregivers inadvertently act as pathfinders to this knowledge.

The narrative introduces the reader to a post-apocalyptic scenario in which women have been almost completely eradicated by the phallogocentric state apparatus and human beings are substituted for a new, genetically-engineered, race. It is a world where autocracy, nuclear radiation, ultra-modern technology, homosexuality, limitless materialism and crime, constant electronic surveillance of private life by the state power are the only reality.

Giti Chandra writes:

"The premise in *Escape* is simple: technology and a phobia of women have combined to create a country (clearly marked as India by the cultural detailing of clothes, food etc.) in which all females have been exterminated and a ruling class of cloned Generals keep a . . . grip of surveillance on the populace. Women are no longer needed for reproduction since men can clone themselves whenever they wish". (Chandra 66)

The protagonist Meiji is the only survivor of the near-complete femicide and the novel documents Meiji's and her guardian Youngest's quest to escape the tyranny of the state machinery. Ruled by the autocratic Generals, it is a desolate world where everything related to the "vermin tribe" i.e. women are completely eradicated. The communication between the citizens and the capitalist-autocratic state power has collapsed and the citizens are compelled to live under the surveillance of human-robots called Drones and vicious bands of soldiers named Boys. Meiji's three uncles – Eldest, Middle and Youngest epitomise the spirit of resistance against the tyrannical state machinery. Interestingly, three of them symbolise the essential human qualities that are lacking in the technologically advanced state: Eldest stands for prophetic vision and insight, Middle epitomises intelligence and meticulousness and Youngest stands for the qualities of affection and empathy. The present state of things is revealed to us through their conversation: „That has been the fate of our entire generation“, said Eldest. „Inevitability was thrust upon us like a skewer through chunks of meat. We can choose to smile as we're exposed to the fire or we can frown – but nothing we do will alter the nature of the fire or our fate" (Padmanabhan 28).

The narrative appears beyond the egregious issues of women's exploitation and oppression to explore the relationship between women and the contemporary state and offers a universal framework of how people interact with their nation-state in the era of corporate capitalism, globalization and technological advancement. The modern citizen's profound yearning for escape from tyranny at the hands of the totalitarian government is symbolized by the protagonist Meiji and her uncles.

Youngest's internal conflict and dilemma about how to handle Meiji's self-disclosure and his own repressed impulses bring him to a moment where he abuses his squirrel harshly. "It's a survival tactic, that's all. We've both got to become diamond hard or we'll be ground down and snuffed out" (188). He is also surprised with the unfathomable changes in her attitude, earlier he. Meiji's sudden strange attitude surprises Youngest ago, he "had always known what she was thinking, even words and expressions came as a delightful revelation" (207), She now disputes with him and disdains him. As the journey comes to an end, the empathetic companions grow apart. Meiji is startled by the physical changes as she gradually grows into puberty. She worries the anatomical change in her physique and believes she has turned into a kind of monster. When she is disguised as a male, it pains her to see men dressed as women; she identifies herself as a talking drone that her uncles made for amusement. Meiji's transition into a grown-up woman keeps reminding Youngest of his mother, sisters, and their untimely demise. He also recalls how Meiji was created by her mother and his relationship with her; Meiji is shocked to learn that Youngest is her father. When Youngest confesses his suppressed desire for Meiji but feels embarrassed about it, asking "what am I - what beast, what filth - to feel this way" (37), Eldest warns him to "discover the limits of his own endurance." (Padmanabhan 89)

In this unsettlingly realistic world, Padmanabhan recounts that *Escape* is a highly relevant study that may delve deeply into the socio-cultural, political, psychological, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and other dimensions associated with the sex-ratio imbalance. The book's prime context is the alarmingly low sex ratio in India, which is mostly caused by severe social prejudice against girls and the egregious misuse of the accessible, affordable sex-determination technology for female abortion. With regard to her novel, Padmanabhan comments,

"In the case of *Escape*, the idea presented itself originally as a newspaper 'middle' which would take the form of a page from the diary of the last Indian woman left alive...I kept thinking that despite all the positive stuff going on, it seemed more likely that women – Indian women anyway – appeared to be on the decline. So that was the context.... around 2006 I began to think of turning that idea into a novel."

In their quest for resistance, the three brothers have made Meiji living a life of denial. Living a prisoner like existence, Meiji symbolises the fate of women in the patriarchal system. Here [T]he reader is reminded of our traditional society where the first form of violence against women is in the denial of knowledge and freedom, denial of self-awareness, denial of the right to form their own destinies and shape their own lives (Joseph 6). Middle, the practical one feels it to be a perfect arrangement for Meiji, as her femininity will cause her danger. But Youngest wants Meiji to discover herself – to be conscious of her femininity. The threat of being caught by the Generals made Meiji and Youngest to take on an arduous journey – to „escape“ to a safe land, beyond the clutches of the state power. Meiji is told that her presence is endangering for all of them and disguised as a boy with prosthetic male sex organ.

Her journey towards self-discovery takes Meiji to various lands and she meets a number of people and gradually becomes aware of the socio-cultural, political, psychological, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and other problems caused by the imbalance in the sexratio. Her real struggle begins when she became aware of her sexuality. Finally, her true identity is revealed to her – she is the daughter of Youngest and her mother sacrificed her own life to save her from the Generals. She feels distraught when Youngest tells her to „escape“ alone as the world outside will not accept any man. In order to quest for a safer and secured world

where the existence of Meiji can be accepted as a natural, they continue their voyage by boating down rivers and avoiding radioactive waste land and thoughtless soldiers. As they travel, they learn things about themselves, relationships, and the multifaceted nature of desire. What's amazing is that the two journeys are carried out simultaneously on both the metaphorical and the superficial, and the work's excellency emerges from the subtle contrast between the two. The entire story revolves around the journey and attempts to depict the delicate twilight domain stirrings in term of both Meiji and the youngest. The twilight zone in Meiji's predicament is a period of tumultuous adolescence where the thirst for experience and the lingering traces of innocence competes for dominance. Furthermore, without any other living existence to instruct or even reassure her that being a woman is normal, she must also comprehend what a woman being is. She is horrified to learn of her stunted growth and nearly despises herself when she learns that she is the last one of a wiped-out women identity in this patriarchal world.

In this dystopic novel Padmanabhan has subtly hinted at the intricate relationship of the women subjects and the modern state machinery in the twenty-first century India. Contemporary women have to struggle continuously against the various facets of gender inequality as pointed out Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom* (1999): “survival inequality, natality inequality, unequal facilities, ownership inequality, unequal sharing of household benefits and chores, and domestic violence and physical victimization” (Sen 224). We need a fuller cognizance of the power and reach of women's enlightened and constructive agency and an adequate appreciation of the fact that women's power and initiative can uplift the lives of all human beings - men, women and children. Gender-inequality is a far-reaching societal impairment, not merely a special deprivation of women.

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