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Portrayal of futuristic society in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*

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Abstract

A South Asian acclaimed writer Manjula Padmanabhan who won the first ever Onassis International Award is well known for her dystopian plays, novels and stories for children. Manjula Padmanabhan's law of life on earth—forms the stuff of her dystopian novels. Her novel, *Escape* (2008) is a harsh sketch folk have been wiped out. The chief context of *Escape* is the declining sex-ratio in India which is the horrifying vision of the future where women have been completely exterminated. *Escape* moves from its basic theme of the oppression and exploitation of women to the end of humanity in the era of technological perfection. The paper aims at analysing the futuristic society portrayed in Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape*. It aims to discuss how the novel articulates Padmanabhan's concerns over insane scientific aggression and fast receding humanism.

Keywords: Dystopia, nightmare, female foeticide, extermination, techno culture, resistance

Introduction

Many feminist writers wrote science fiction and fantasy using utopian genres to deal with the issues of gender oppression and patriarchy. A journalist, an acclaimed playwright and comic strip artist, the author of many children's books including *Mouse Attack*, and the illustrator of many others, Manjula Padmanabhan is well known for her dystopian novels. Dystopia, as opposed to utopia, refers to an undesirable condition, a worst-case scenario to moralistic observers. Her novels, *Escape* (2008) and its sequel *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) are based on the idea one step ahead from today's the digital world, focusing on the serious issue of women's existence in future. Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* is woven in the land of imagination and lots of scope is there to see the future world without female which would really be the dreadful and beyond our expectation. Technocrat dictator Generals' utopian world order has become a nightmare for the vulnerable in the novel. It brings out the image of futuristic world where women will be completely exterminated.

Portrayal of futuristic world

Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian novel *Escape* takes a futuristic view of the world. The novel is set in the future where the world's nations do not exist anymore and there is only one global government, the Whole World Union (WWU), which splits the planet into four entirely separate enclaves, where no trade, communication or travel arrangements are allowed. Out of the four, 'The Zone' is the most dominant central enclave, a giant arena for a continuous savage and immensely popular cycle of war games. The Zone known as the Forbidden Land or Country, also called as 'Brotherland' is dominated and ruled by misogynist dictator General. His government is completely undemocratic. It is controlled by cloned military Generals. They control the residents by using Drones or human robots, and Boyz or awful groups of officers. The whole biological system has been ruined by nuclear assaults. This is the place where women are not protected. They are completely eradicated by various means. Most surprisingly, even words, pictures and images identified with women are also restricted. Padmanabhan's *Escape* depicts the life at the Forbidden Country, Brotherland, while its sequel *The Island of Lost Girls* depicts the life at the Island, a secret land far away from the Forbidden Country. The Island is governed by ciswomen, the Mentors with funds from the WWU to run it independently.

Most of Padmanabhan's novels are set in the future where India is transformed by economic and technological development. *Escape* takes place in the futuristic time zone of technological perfection and corporate capitalist modernist world. It is set in the fictional dystopian country known as Brotherland, the Forbidden Country. The author has abstained from giving the name or location of a real-world country to emphasize that the issues raised in the novel are universal and can apply to any place. But the names and words mentioned in the text indicate that incidents happened in India or somewhere in the Indian subcontinent.

Escape portrays Brotherland as a country or land governed by the misogynist dictatorship of Generals, set in the futuristic world inhabited by Clones, Drones and Boyz, all a figment of science fiction. It depicts how in Brotherland, women have been exterminated and men can self-clone. The novel offers the story of Meiji, the only female survivor in the Forbidden Land. In Brotherland, women are extinct under a two-decade programme eliminating natural procreation in favour of a cloning technology that gives complete control to a dictatorship of Generals. The protagonist Meiji is the last surviving female as the females have been wiped out, as the Generals have invented the cloning technology annihilating the need for natural procreation altogether. In the Forbidden Country, "Women are no longer needed for reproduction since men can clone themselves whenever they wish. They are not required for sex as homosexuality has replaced heterosexuality as the norm" (Chandra 12).

The novel opens in the atmosphere of mystery and terror, inhabited by half human robots, where body and brain are subjugated. In the first part of the novel, it has been told that the dictatorship of government Generals have exterminated eradicated women from their land, called Brotherland. In the research article entitled, "Exposition of the Existential Angst and Psychological Distress in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*", Mol K Krishnaja and others observes the ill effects of male domination upon females as depicted in the novel. She writes,

The sexual abuse that women face in the contemporary society also gains prominence in the novel. The inter-mixing of science fiction with that of eco-feminism makes it a perfect blend. The tragic plight of the characters who are made ignorant by those in power is yet another aspect that is studied upon. Above all the denial of human rights to suit the norms of those in power is clearly reflected in the novel (542).

The story of the novel revolves around the protagonist Meiji, who boldly faces challenging adventures, and proves her strength to escape from Brotherland, the Forbidden Country. Meiji's uncles namely Eldest, Middle and Youngest were rich landlords before the Great Change introduced by the Generals. After the Change, they lost their big home. They tried to raise voice against the transcendent government but it is of no use. So, they raise Meiji secretly on the Estate managed by them. They keep her hidden. She lives a life like a prisoner since birth; she doesn't know about the outside world. She lives in an underground manor, equipped with each extravagance and kept an eye on by robots intended to secure her. Meiji is honest and fragile, ignorant of her sex, submitting to the standards of her Uncles. She battles with her feelings. She says, "Women were never available for the plucking, you know! Yes, but at least it was a common condition to feel desires? Come on, yes, but always requiring restraint" (37). The above lines reveal Meiji's innocence and hidden life in the country. She tolerates the sufferings and worries. She doesn't know her gender as well as feelings.

In the course of time, Meiji comes to know that her own mother had publicly immolated herself (a sacrifice with clear sati resonances) in order that the Generals might think that there were no female survivors in their family, thus saving Meiji's life. Her Uncles advise Meiji not to come out because she might be seen by the outsiders as well as by the suitor. The suitor is about twenty years old and healthy, permitted to talk to Meiji without seeing her, who has entered the chamber after six days of security test. As a female, Meiji's life is at threat. She is not allowed to go out because her uncles believe that she will also be destroyed like other women once identified as a female. She is the only biological female left at the place. Meiji's uncles try best to protect her by keeping her hidden, but after some time keeping her hidden becomes difficult for her them. The

Generals arrange inspection twice to trace Meiji, but they do not find her. So, as Meiji grows into puberty, her three uncles decide to escort her outside the Brotherland, so that she is not eventually discovered by the General on one of his frequent visits. Her uncles devise an ideal arrangement of Meiji's escape. They decide to move her to a safer destination. A scared and puzzled Meiji is advised to begin preparing for the journey with no inquiries. To keep her safe during the journey, she is veiled as a boy and even fitted with an artificial penis. Youngest is assigned the duty to accompany Meiji and keep her safe during a long, extremely dangerous journey across a wasteland and the forbidden land. The planned journey is the journey from Brotherland to the Island, a place of scientific experimentation and relatively safe place for the mutilated trans and ciswomen of the world.

The entire plot of the novel is built around this journey of Meiji and her uncle Youngest. Meiji's uncles worry about Meiji's her future life. They try best to protect Meiji from mystery rebels who can smell or murder her. Their discussion uncovers the awfulness of life in an oppressive state. Eldest explains the difficulties involved in the journey to escape from the country of Generals: "That has been the fate of our entire generation... 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" (26). Youngest, who is the closest to Meiji, struggles with his emotions as he observes her femininity. Actually, Meiji is not aware about her own identity. The uncles debate whether they should tell Meiji who she really is. Middle, the most practical of the three, feels that allowing Meiji to grow naturally would invite great danger. He wishes to keep her as a child forever. Youngest, the most emotional of the three, feels that this would be a treachery. He wants Meiji to discover herself what a "woman" is.

To save and to survive Meiji in future, her uncle Youngest, along with Meiji sets a risky journey to an island as to protect her life. Meiji gets blessings from their uncles by touching their feet. Meiji and Youngest dressed as Indian workers, start their journey. Meiji has worked out physically hard in climbing, jumping, bending her bodies in the narrow cart and adopting the body in the control. She acts like a boy in the outdoor journey. First, they have to cross the Great Waste, a no man's land loaded with radioactive poisons. They wear radioactive weight suits and travel in an extraordinarily planned, covered Desert Chariot. The novel portrays Meiji and Youngest's adventures as they make their way across the dangerous terrains of Brotherland. They face the General's security personnel Boyz (an armed force of indistinguishable clones), robots, drones, predatory male characters such as Budget and Swan, and the despotic ruler General who is determined to kill all women.

During their journey, when Meiji makes her first appearance in the Continuum Palace, she is stared at by the men gathered there even though she was dressed as a boy. The test for Youngest, who has a place with an age that has been denied female friendship, is to control his illegal want for Meiji. Tortured by recollections of his mom and sisters who were killed by the Generals, he faces the overwhelming undertaking of clarifying the significance of womanhood to Meiji who might develop by years in two or three months. His words uncover the hit to mankind delivered by a despotic state and the fearless endeavor of a resident to save humanity:

I remember our... sisters I remember them from the time before our mother died, before theevery atom of their presence. I didn't realize at the time that an entire spectrum of gentleness and beauty would pass from this world. I will know intuitively how to lead our little girl into that lost universe of womanhood. Even as I fear it, look forward to it, long for it, desire it. Whatever I do, it will be with my heart, not with cold reason, but with love (53).

After a few days, Meiji and Youngest arrive at the City on the coastline, the edge of the General's nation. The city bears all the characteristics of the extraordinary change introduced by the autocracy of the Generals-atomic radiation, ultra-present day innovation, homosexuality, boundless realism and wrongdoing, steady electronic reconnaissance of private life by the state. Meiji and Youngest remain at the bequest of a wealthy friend named Budget, who makes due with the endowments of the Generals. The Generals continually visit him, so they are careful. The

decision General outputs Youngest brain through mystery correspondence with his individual clone Generals. Meanwhile, the general visits the house of Meiji. He suspects strongly that they protect a girl and hides from him. So often he visits their house. He doubtfully says, "She escaped this earth without even knowing what had befallen her. Do you think she was lucky? Very, very, lucky?" (56).

Then Youngest and Meiji catch a ride on a cart. In this dry land loaded with non-domesticated wild canines, they pull in envy from starving voyagers. The surrendered more established men stay with the recollections of the past, however the more youthful men who have no wonderful recollections are pitiful and age rashly. Indeed, even Meiji and Youngest become solidified. Youngest castigates Meiji at whatever point she begins sobbing uncontrollably. Slowly they figure out how to adjust to the threatening area and get by on the barest least. Youngest ends up changing into a meagre, dull worker and Meiji becomes for the time being into an irate grown-up with her own privileged insights. They venture towards a dronery where cloned workers are created, since such dronerries are the main flourishing foundations where essential necessities are openly accessible.

Meiji and Youngest face many dangerous attacks during their journey. The proprietor of the dronery is a derisive, prurient elderly person who produces sub-par drones. At the point when he attempts to attack Meiji, Youngest executes him and assumes control over the dronery. As Meiji develops into a wonderful youngster, the deteriorating drones in the dronery appear to be considerably progressively dangerous. At the point when the half-human, half machine drones turn barbarian, Meiji and Youngest escape to the woods. While safeguarding her from the General's militaries, Youngest describes her how the Generals had assumed control over the once lovely nation and transformed it into an atomic desert inhabited by clones. They venture further into the woodlands, and once stunning islands, presently landfill and thus proceed day by day. During the journey, Youngest uncovers to her that she is the little girl of Youngest and his cousin who had experience passionate feelings for and hitched during the consideration of the Generals' delightful mother had immolated herself openly so as to redirect the rule of dread. That Meiji's from her infant. Bit by bit Meiji now acknowledges how valuable she is, as the last enduring individual-woman from her species.

Then they reach the outskirts which is a landscape called as 'the Capital city of their World'. Twenty-five million people lived in the place before the arrival of Generals, who completely destructed the place by atomic bombs; they destructed the whole city in five days. Thus, through the narrative of the journey, the novelist describes how under the system of the Generals, the once beautiful, happy and blissful land and the human life on the planet turned into degenerated and lost world. A large portion of the country remained is a desert only. The water, soil and air are noxious. The Generals' nuclear bombs have straightened it into rubble, murdering all living things, deserting hot, and seething atomic breezes. The greater part of the populace has died and those alive are tormented by mental and physical sicknesses and live in a semi-cognizant state because of atomic radiation. Their lives are continually checked by the Generals. Without women, most families have gotten wiped out without beneficiaries. Some consent to propagation through cloning. To fulfil their sexual needs, most of the men are compelled to depend on homosexuality. The land is loaded up with half-dead men, cruel clones and automated workers called drones. The main instrument of fear of the Generals are the "Boyz"—a shocking armed force of indistinguishable clones, robed in dark, equipped with tons of weaponry, prepared to slaughter at the smallest incitement.

The villages and towns are inhabited with the pathetic rich men without the will to live, negligible dealers, desert looters, helpless labourers turned out of bequests after their lords kicked the bucket without beneficiaries. A large portion of poor people or the "dust individuals" have been slaughtered by the Generals. Just a couple are kept alive and used to spy upon individual residents. There are no structures left in view of concrete decay. There are no streets or railroads or vehicles with the exception of camel or bullock drawn carts and trucks leased by providers.

Fundamental provisions and essential products are limited and silently pirated by supporters of Generals. In the desolated towns, sculptures of Generals speck the scene. The mesmerizing music and instructions of the Generals are overflowed on the ground. Public become quiet and angry, surrender to destiny and ready for death. They assemble to share their "fantasies" which allude to aching for the past when women existed. Public are never given a chance to take decision however to decline in all regards.

Afterwards Meiji and Youngest reach the coastal city where it is seen that atomic radiation has murdered most of the species and those enduring seem colossal. Because of concrete decay, everything is made of plastic or metal. The rich way of life and logical headway are faltering. Homosexuality is the commotion. The most noticeable component of the nation is the nonappearance of women. After six days of journey, they face many troubles like fuel scarcity, food and water. But they manage and for the lunch they eat egg, noodles boiled in the water. Meiji symbolizes the modern girl who loves adventurous journey and risky actions. She manages and loves all like her Youngest uncle. She represents the dare bold modern women.

Lastly, Meiji and Youngest reach a village which is near to the island with the help of a boat. They hear a chanting sound. At night they reach the island where they meet a girl named Red. Youngest shares the story of her mother and sisters. Finally, they reach their destination and they are received by Budget, their relative. They stay at Budget's house. Meiji feels uneasy to stay in the place, so she feels fear to talk to Youngest. So, she asks Youngest whether the place is safe or not. She thinks that the people in that place are different, so she is afraid to talk.

Thus, the novel depicts degenerating effect on the mind and body of a woman under threat. The journey has a symbolic meaning for both Meiji and uncle Youngest. For Meiji it is a journey to womanhood and for Youngest it is a struggle with his carnal feelings and propriety. The protagonist Meiji and her Uncles symbolise secret resistance and strong desire to escape from such a governmental tyranny of the dictator Generals. Underlying the grotesque sci-fi genre, characters like drones, Generals, Boyz and the symbolic blasted landscape painted in dystopian terms is the effervescent lust for life and dreams of attaining womanhood.

Conclusion

To conclude, Padmanabhan's dystopian novel *Escape* brings out how the declining sex-ratio in India is mainly the result of the strong social bias against the girl child, the gross misuse of the cheap and widely available technology of sex-determination for female foeticide and rising violence against women at both domestic and public level. The novel offers a realistic portrayal of futuristic world which witnesses the open execution of women by the dictator Generals. They are the symbols of the technocrats who are full of lust for money and power. The novel elaborates on how the Generals consider women just reproductive machines and there are no such roles of women as mother, sister, daughter etc. for them. It sheds light on the manner in which the Generals and machines team up to demolish women and the land for their personal stakes is suggestive of neo-pioneer propensities in the India. The characters in the novel are denied freedoms which are the right of every human being. And so, right from the outset of the novel, Youngest has less hope of escaping from the Brotherland which is always under constant surveillance. Nonetheless, the novel has an open ending with Meiji and Youngest sharing a conversation in the point with the hope that Meiji can make her way across this country to be given harbour by any of the neighbouring nations. Towards the end of the novel, the novelist cautions the present generations that if they continue to be insensitive to the declining and degenerating state of the land and woman and continue the use of technology in such a way that it ultimately became a threat to human life, the future will be in danger as the novel portrays.

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