

DEPICTION OF TRIAL AND TRIBULATIONS OF WOMAN PROTAGONIST IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *ESCAPE*

Dr. Rajesh Vishnu Yeole, Mr. Debraj Moulick

(Head, Department of U.G. P.G. and Research Centre in English, Changu Kana Thakur Arts, Commerce and Science College, New Panvel Autonomous, District: Raigad: Pin Code: 41206 Mobile no: 9819149665)

(*Research Scholar, Department of English, **Lecturer (English), K. J. Somaiya Polytechnic, Mumbai. Email – debraj.m@somaiya.edu)

Abstract

Manjula Padmanabhan is considered a significant woman novelist in the realm of Indian Literature. She has also contributed tremendously in the development of Indian Science Fiction. She is aptly called as a trend setter especially in the domain of science fiction. The prominent works of Manjula Padmanabhan are a reflection of inequality in sex ratio, oppression of females, subordination, exploitation and mutilation of women. She is the recipient of the prestigious Onassis award on account of outstanding contribution in the growth of Science Fiction. There is representation of female identity and empowerment of women through her remarkable novel Escape. The protagonist of the novel is Meiji who is known as the only female survivor in the all-male world. The government has decided to exterminate all the females but it is the mission of uncle to save her against all odds. The reality is that Meiji is not allowed to experience normal childhood and adulthood on account of restrictions and surveillance. The setting of the novel is related to advancement of technology, acceptance of homosexuality amongst men and extermination of women leading towards a dystopian future. This research paper primarily investigates trials and tribulations experienced by the woman protagonist of the novel.

Divulging into Dystopian States

Science Fiction can be termed as a genre in literature which is based on probable potential scientific or technological advances and major social or environmental changes, frequently portraying space travel, time travel and life on other planets among others. It also deals with the effect of the scientific and technological inventions on human life, community, society and country at large. This technology which is actually aimed at the betterment of human condition is often misused by the state in order to establish an absolute autocracy on its people. Thus it leads to the end of freedom, individuality and free thinking of the people. Dystopia is one of the sub-genres of Science Fiction which paints a similar society in the future governed by the totalitarian government with the aid of technical innovations and devices. It leads to the total obliteration of human life across various strata of socio- economic structure. There have been numerous works of science fiction which successfully dealt with the notion of dystopian society either in distant future or in alternate historical settings. Dystopia has been also termed as a cynical successor of Utopia. Utopia is another subgenre which is just the opposite of Dystopia .i.e. a perfect society with all the positive aspects of human life. Debraj Moulick writes in his article, 'The Decadence of Humanity : Double Dose of Dystopias' published in Kalpabhiswa, the first and biggest online Science Fiction web magazine in Bengali language provides a detailed idea about Dystopian Science Fiction Literature written in English Language.

Science Fiction has been successful in instigating imaginary futures for humanity. The two most distinctive features include utopia and dystopia. Utopia refers to a perfect society, whereas dystopia refers to a social order without the value of human life in a general sense. It is an invented world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a catastrophic society in the future. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1952), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) are regarded as some of the finest examples of dystopian science fiction.

The Indian English language has also produced some dystopias set within the backdrop of Indian society. These books dealt with various issues of a dystopian society such as the consequence of an apocalypse, religious dogmatism, propaganda politics, casteism, gender- inequalities, water-scarcity, climatic condition, exploiting nature, organ trading, genetically human – animal hybrid among others. The notable examples include: Manjula Padmanabhan's play *Harvest* (1997), Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), Sowmya Rajendran's *Lessons* (2015). Prayag Akbar's novel *Leila* (2017) and Priya Sarukkai Chabria's novel *Clone* (2018).

Manjula Padmanabhan's No Country for Women

Indian playwright, novelist, cartoonist and artist, Manjula Padmanabhan is prominent for her insightful writings that frequently touch on socio-political premises. Padmanabhan's drama *Harvest*, which examines themes of exploitation, globalisation, and the morality of the organ trade, brought her fame on a global scale. She received the Onassis award for her dystopian play. The works of Padmanabhan frequently question established narratives and encourage critical thought about current concerns. Her other notable works include: *Escape* (2008), *Three Virgins and Other Stories* (2013), *Island of Lost Girls* (2015) and *Stolen Hours and Curiosities* (2023). A hugely circulated Indian magazine Outlook praised Padmanabhan's writing: 'A writer's writer....[Padmanabhan] nudges the reader out of habit and complacency, constantly testing the barriers of the possible and the probable.'

Manjula Padmanabhan's novel, *Escape* (2008) is a science fiction novel set against the backdrop of a futuristic nation that resembles India in various aspects like culture, tradition, and landscapes. It is a dystopian country ruled by extremist generals and his clone brothers. The totalitarian government is aided in its sinister scheme of overall control over its citizens with new age scientific technologies and a group of male lethal soldiers known as 'Boys'. The narrative focuses on a family of three brothers, namely Elder, Middle, and Youngest, residing in a large estate and their subsequent struggle to keep one female alive, Meiji. In the post-apocalyptic country, the government has promoted homosexuality, exploitation of nature and the female population of the nation was wiped out through mass extermination a few years ago. The novel focuses on an unsettling account of an extraordinary journey taken by the only female survivor of the country, Meiji, along with the youngest brother, across the treacherous nooks and corners of the homeland to the very edge of the world, which lies on the other side. *Escape* skillfully addressed a number of troubling issues, including the necessity for a feminine identity, the shadowy side of technology, the worrisome male-female ratio in society, and the fallout from propaganda politics.

The Plight of Meiji

The novel centers around the teenage girl, Meiji who is brought up by her three uncles namely Eldest, Middle and Younger in an estate in a post-apocalyptic country where the female population have been annihilated in a systematic manner by the invincible government. The novel mentions that the current government believes that the women have two fold purposes of being a progenitor and domestic slave. Thus artificial reproduction and drones have replaced them in society. Basundhara Chakraborty in her research article 'No Woman's Land: Women, Nation and Dystopia in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*' writes: "Written in the form of a dark dystopian fable, 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" (Chakraborty, 82)

Meiji, a sixteen year old girl, is the only link to the past of a nation prior to the Great Change, which exterminated the entire female population of the country. The General, the despotic ruler, takes every possible measure to eradicate women in every household. Women have provided derogatory terms like 'Vermin Tribe', ugly little wretch, less-than-human flame and wi-men. All the memories related to women be it in culture, literature and society have been replaced. One episode from the novel explains the amount of hatred towards the women when the General find out the existence of a female in one of the households; he visits them and murders the little girl in front of the whole family with a sadistic pleasure:

"It is from compassion that I snuff her out, this leaking vessel, this less-than-human flame." And with that I snapped her neck, cleanly and without a struggle. She escaped this earth without even knowing what had befallen her. Do you not think she was lucky? Very, very, lucky? " (*Escape*, 56)

The three brothers kept Meiji in a confined state and she was subjected to hormone therapy in order to restrict the growth of female organs and feminine structures. Their intention was to save her from the eye-sight of General. Their solution to save her was to transport her to a place far away from the cursed land ruled by patriarchal animals like General. Meiji's escape route was planned meticulously across the huge waste with the help of Youngest Uncle as her guide. Meiji is brought up in a denial and while trotting her way through various locales, she discovers her identity as a different gender.

".....'she needs to know the whole truth about herself. About the circumstances of her birth. About the state of the world at that time. About the changes that have taken place since then and about the fact that we have stunted her growth. And she needs to choose what she would like for her future." (*Escape*, 20)

The three uncles took up enough pain to keep Meiji alive but it was not possible to keep her secure as she was about to step into adolescence, they planned a runoff from the cursed land. The Elder Brother made Meiji go through a shocking experience of dropping her pants and attaching a pseudo male sex organ in order to avoid her execution if caught alive by the Boy Soldiers of General. The following line echoes the snippets of the horrible moment in Meiji's life: When she was done, which had required a certain amount of wriggling and straightening of the stretchy bands, she found that she now had a small, flaccid pipe-like organ hanging between her legs. (*Escape*, 66-67)

Meiji constantly looks for answers from her co-traveler, Youngest Uncle about the necessity to take a dangerous journey into the unknown stretches of land. Moreover, she is in a quest to know about her own identity. Youngest Uncle struggles to provide an answer about her identity. Meiji's physical body doesn't progress in the natural order owing to chemical inserting and she psychologically as well as socially struggles to cope up with the idea of her being physically different from her three uncles as she doesn't have any female family members, no female in peer group and moreover the perspective of being a female. Simran Mittal in her article "From Other to Posthuman: Meiji's Journey in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls*" states the following words: "They keep Meiji in a prepubescent stasis using hormone-blocking pills and bring up her as a boy. She knows she is physically different from her uncle's but has no context for what it means to be a woman." (Mittal, 02)

Meiji finally manages to handle the shocking discovery of her sexuality, history of her natural birth, sacrifice of her mother and moreover her biological father through a series of events which are haunting, disturbing and more importantly shocking to the core. The totalitarian rulers suppressed both the women and nature. Padmanabhan provides an open ending about the fate of Meiji leaving the readers to decide about it. However; in the sequel to *Escape*, *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) it is shown that Meiji is adopted by a colony of cis-women on Vane Island, which is situated in modern-day Africa.

CONCLUSION

Meiji is going through both psychological and physical challenges. She finds it difficult to lead a regular life in a nation that forbids women. She bears the emotional weight of having survived at her mother's ultimate sacrifice. Meiji is isolated from the outer world as he grows up in a cocoon. She seems like a little child who is oblivious to her sexuality and femininity. She experiences the trauma that her presence was putting the three uncles in jeopardy of. When Meiji is forced to wear a prosthetic male penis in order to survive extinction, she experiences gendered othering. She learns about her biological heritage and the imbalance in socio-cultural and political concerns due to the imbalanced gender ratio while traveling on the complicated voyage with her youngest uncle across the Forbidden Country. Meiji is deprived of woman companionship and moreover the basic human right to exist as a free individual in an androcentric society in the dystopian Science Fiction, *Escape*.

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