



No Woman's Land: Women, Nation and Dystopia in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*

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Abstract

Manjula Padmanabhan has been one of the most potent literary voices in contemporary India. An artist, cartoonist, playwright, short story writer, journalist, children's author, novelist, she has always pursued us to rethink what it means to be a woman in modern nation state and to interrogate women's relationship with technology and state power. My paper will do a textual analysis of one such work by her – *Escape* (2008), her first attempt at writing fiction for adults. The novel is a dark dystopian fable which 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. The protagonist Meiji is the only survivor of the near-complete femicide and the novel documents Meiji's and her uncle Youngest's quest to escape the tyranny of the state machinery. The paper will examine the feminist dystopia as Padmanabhan's veiled critique of the subordinated status of women in India, where fifty million girls went 'missing' from population according to the UN report. According to the 2011 census, India's current child sex-ratio is 914 females per 1000 males, which is the lowest since the 1961 census. Setting her novel in this setting, Padmanabhan has presented a protest against the marginal status of women in modern India.

Keywords

Manjula Padmanabhan, dystopia, subordinated, protest, women

Manjula Padmanabhan has been one of the most potent literary voices in contemporary India. An artist, cartoonist, playwright, short story writer, journalist, children's author, novelist, she has always pursued us to rethink what it means to be a woman in modern nation state and to interrogate women's relationship with technology and state power. According to Prof. B. Parvathi:

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 behaviour, its exploitation in a family and social setting..... Padmanabhan has opened a fresh dialogue on a new angle of feminist concerns (136-147).

My paper will do a textual analysis of one such work by her – *Escape* (2008), her first attempt at writing fiction for adults. 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. 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. They are not required for sex as homosexuality has replaced heterosexuality as the norm (12).

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).

Prior to the Great Change that eradicated the womenfolk of the nation, the three brothers had been living a life of prosperity and after the Change they have well-equipped themselves with technology to resist the tyranny of the Generals. Yet the constant fear of losing Meiji have made them wonder: “. . . could we have offered more resistance . . . all those who survived and became established in the new order. Did we have choices? Were there other paths we could have – should have taken?” (Padmanabhan 27)

In their quest for resistance, the three brothers have made Meiji living a life of denial. Subjected to hormone suppressants since her childhood, Meiji is not conscious about her femininity and resembles a child in appearance. Dwelling in an underground mansion since her childhood, she is unaware of the world outside. 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, she is made to leave her safe cocoon:

You will climb out of this safe, underground seed case in which you have been germinating for so long, push your two little green leaves up out of the soil, raise your head to the sun and – thrive. That is what we all hope for you (Padmanabhan 89).

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 sex-ratio. 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:

. . . I belong to a place that is no longer mentioned outside our borders. That’s the price we paid for what was identified, by . . . the United Nations, as the ‘most extreme crime against humanity our planet has ever yet acknowledged’. The very name of our country has been deleted from the record of the civilized world. So if they’re going to recognize anyone from here, on compassionate grounds, it’ll only be you. That’s a woman. Not a man. Not any men . . . You could say it’s a kind of reverse justice. (417-418).

The novel ends with a ray of hope as Meiji promises herself that she will tell the world what her father has done for her and she vows to come back to take him out of the wasteland.

In the *Escape*, Padmanabhan presents a horrifying futuristic vision of India where over 50 million girls and women went “missing” due to termination of the female foetus or high mortality of the girl child due to lack of proper care (*Swayam –Leaflet*). According to the 2011 census, India’s current child sex-ratio is 914 females per 1000 males, which is the lowest since the 1961 census. Sneh Lata Tandon and Renu Sharma write:

The twin process of ‘elimination of unborn daughters’ and the ‘slow killing’ through neglect and discrimination of those that are born has become a matter of concern . . . Legally infanticide amounts to homicide... yet law alone cannot root out this social problem. The girls are devalued not only because of the economic considerations but also because of socio-cultural factors . . . (4, 8-9).

The bleak, desolate life of the novel seems not to be far away as in India, a case of rape is reported every twenty-two minutes, a case of bride being burnt for dowry is reported every fifty-eight minutes (Sehgal, *The Deccan Chronicle*). By combining adventure story with romance, philosophy, sexuality, fantasy and the elements of science fiction, Padmanabhan has “give [us] a strong warning about the unimaginable terrors that humanity would have to face if the violence against women is allowed to continue unabated” (Joseph 2). The constitutional provisions proved futile to curb the various forms of gender based violence - female foeticide, female infanticide, dowry deaths, honour killings, sati, rape etc. Padmanabhan herself says about her novel:

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 (“Dhvani”).

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 has 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”(224). Sen in *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (2006) further reminds us:

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. That social understanding is urgent as well as momentous (250).

Escape takes up this ‘momentous’ case of ‘societal impairment’. In the novel, young men deprived of female companionship are seen to be desperate to do anything to get it. This, reminds us of the social upheaval in several parts of Northern India where continued

female infanticide and feticide has resulted in such a huge gap in the sex-ratio. As there are scarcity of brides available for men of marriageable age, social evils like incest and polyandry has caused demographic and social disaster.

The autocratic statecraft in the novel is seen to believe that “Perfect ignorance opens the path to perfect obedience” (Padmanabhan 33). They explained their act of femicide thus: “Females are driven by biological imperatives that lead them to compete for breeding rights. Whereas collectives breed cooperatively. In order to control breeding technology and to establish the collective ethic we had to eliminate them.” (Padmanabhan 271). Dr. V. Rositta Joseph writes:

Manjula Padmanabhan views the State as an institution wherein both men and women are enslaved at a deeper level and are at the mercy of an elitist patriarchal regime. We need to introspect if the selfish, corrupt and ruthless tendencies of the male leaders feel threatened by the ethically stronger side of women (6-7).

Women and nature are seen to be a threat just like in the capitalist nation-state. A strong parallel can be drawn between the men’s attempt to colonize women’s body and contemporary nation-state’s attempt to dominate and exploit Nature. The novel is set in a landscape of radioactive wasteland dominated by the phallogocentric state apparatus. We can easily find a parallel between the futuristic vision of a radioactive wasteland and the present world of capitalist ambition and science which is disgraceful towards both women and nature. In her article titled “Ecofeminism in India: Disappearing Daughters in Padmanabhan’s *Escape*”, Rupali Palodkar writes:

In Indian society, the ownership of women’s body and sexuality and that of land (nature) has continued to vest with men since ancient times. Of all places in the world, it is in India that sex-selective abortions are practiced on a wide-scale, especially in the northern part of the country.... There is a need to find an alternative to men’s exploitation of the earth... and to discover an ecologically sound way of life that would not threaten the existence either of the earth or of women. That is why women writers like Manjula Padmanabhan are turning to ecofeminist thinking and are writing about the consequences of degradation of nature and woman (4).

Padmanabhan in *Escape* presents a civilization on the verge of destruction due to the tyrannical regime of the self-engrossed, elitist, corrupt, patriarchal capitalist rulers. Here she hints at the terrible future that awaits the modern nation-states if they continue with their ruthless power politics. It is interesting enough that the land presented in the novel bears a high resemblance with India and Indians. Padmanabhan has made her characters wear Indian cloths like kurtas, chiffon veils, tunics, they eat rotis, curries, lassi, rice pilaffs, paan and smoke from hookahs; they listen to taals played on the veena, to the bamboo flute and the ghatam. Even the characters follow the typical Indian custom of touching the feet of elders to seek blessings. Padmanabhan has also made a free use of terms from the vernacular languages (Joseph 9).

Escape is not just a dystopic vision of the future, it is something beyond it. It is a tale of human quest against all odds. The name of the protagonist of the novel deserves attention in this context. According to the *Collins Dictionary*, Meiji in Japanese means

“enlightened peace”. It is an inspiring narrative of human victory against tyrannical power. It is about a journey towards enlightenment and peace. The genre of dystopic narratives is not a maiden one in India. For instance, we can mention Suniti Namjoshi’s *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), a celebratory take on matriarchal society; Anuradha Marwah-Roy’s *Idol Love* (1999), which presents a desolate vision of India in the twenty-first century or Tarun Tejpal’s *In The Valley of Masks* (2011) where the self get immolated in favour of collective interest. The metaphoric value of the narrative makes *Escape* stand out among these novels. While presenting a futuristic vision of the nation, the novel at the same time gives voice to some issues which have largely remained marginalised – issue of female infanticide and its deplorable effects on the mankind. The sex ratio of the world’s largest democracy is indicating an alarming decline in recent times. According to a Sample Registration System (SRS) survey India’s sex ratio, or the number of females per 1,000 males, declined to 896 in 2015-17 from 898 in 2014-16 (Tripathi “Declining”). In 2014, a United Nations report said the dwindling number of girls in India had reached “emergency proportions” and was contributing to crimes against women (Kuchay “India”). Through her narrative Padmanabhan has tried to lead us to the mode of self-realisation against an alarming socio-political reality that would lead to destruction if not rectified in time. *Escape* is a tour de force not only because it presents a futuristic vision of the present state of affairs but also because it reveals a cosmic vision of truth and a panacea to the conflict between reality and expectations. Padmanabhan’s first novel shows a greater maturity, a cosmic vision, a passage from direct portrayal of men and society to symbolism, prophecy and experimentation. *Escape* stands perhaps as one of the most significant and uniquely political of contemporary Indian English fiction on account of its emphasis on the salvation of humanity against the backdrop of the eternal clash of good and evil.

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