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## Depiction of Trial and Tribulations of Woman Protagonist in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*

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### **Abstract:**

Manjula Padmanabhan is considered a significant woman novelist in Indian Literature. She has also contributed tremendously to the development of Indian Science Fiction. She is aptly called a trendsetter, especially in 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 for her outstanding contribution to the growth of Drama. There is a lack of female identity and the need for empowerment of women in an all-male nation depicted in her novel *Escape*. Meiji, the lone female survivor in an all-male world, is the protagonist in Padmanabhan's novel.

The Government has decided to exterminate all the females but it is the mission of the three uncles 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 the advancement of technology, acceptance of homosexuality amongst men, and extermination of women leading towards a dystopian future. This research paper primarily investigates the trials and tribulations experienced by the woman protagonist in the novel.

**Key Words:** Indian Science Fiction, Dystopia, Female Identity, Totalitarian Government

### **Divulging into the Dystopian States**

Science Fiction can be termed as a genre in literature that 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 scientific and technological inventions on human life, community, society, and country at large. This technology which is aimed at the betterment of the human condition is often misused by the state 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 that successfully dealt with the notion of a dystopian society either in the distant future or in alternate historical settings. Dystopia has been also succinctly termed as a cynical successor of Utopia. Utopia is another subgenre that is just the opposite of Dystopia. i.e. a perfect society with all the positive aspects of human life. In Dystopia, human life becomes a commodity i.e. it is treated as some materials which can be brought and discarded at free will. Debraj Moulick writes in his article, 'The Decadence of Humanity: Double Dose of Dystopias' published in Kalpabiswa, the first and biggest online Science Fiction web magazine in India, (Bengali) provides a detailed idea about Dystopian Science Fiction Literature written in the 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. (Moulick)

The Indian English literature has also produced some dystopias written 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 conditions, exploiting nature, organ trading and 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), and 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 upon socio-political premises. Padmanabhan's drama *Harvest*, which examines themes of exploitation, globalization, third-world crisis, and the morality of organ trade in a futuristic world, brought her fame on a global scale. She is a recipient of 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 dystopian 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, and 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 several 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 a closely guarded estate in a post-apocalyptic country where the female population has been annihilated systematically by the invincible Government. The systematic removal of a particular segment of the population is visible in Holocaust literature which dealt with the extermination of the Jewish population by Adolf Hitler. The notable works include Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies, and Gentlemen* (1947), and Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982), *Escape*, mentions that current government believes that women have only twofold purposes, firstly being a progenitor and secondly a domestic slave. Artificial reproduction and drones have systematically replaced them in society. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) another dystopian cum utopian classic, the reader can notice a similar system by the government where natural births have been methodically substituted with test tube babies in the state-operated factories, relieving women from the agony of childbirths. However; Huxley's plot didn't eradicate the women population. In *Escape*, the female populations are hunted, spotted, and destroyed by the State. The female population is replaced with a new category of people, who are genetically bred in the state-of-the-art labs of the government, programmed to abide by the rules and regulations of the country. Padmanabhan explains the horrific substitution of humans by the posthuman in the dystopian society. These neo-species have been termed as clones and boys throughout the novel. One of the researchers in her work, comments about the careful systematic replacement of fairer sex. 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 teenage girl, is the only link to the past of a nation before 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 been labelled with derogatory terms such as ‘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 women when the General finds out about 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 and ruthlessly remarks as: “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 to restrict the growth of female organs and feminine structures. They intended 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 wasteland with the help of the Youngest Uncle as her guide. Meiji is brought up in denial and while trotting her way through various locales, she discovers her identity as a different gender. Therefore, the author has aptly remarked as; ‘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 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. It has been suitably depicted as: “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 on a quest to know about her own identity. The novel traces the journey of the two travelers across the dry, barren, and polluted area filled with waste and radiation visualizing the lack of fertility and virility among the people of the nation. The backdrop or landscape serves as a metaphor or an important character, Moulick in his research article, “Tracing Final Frontiers of Indian Speculative Fiction In Satyajit Ray’s, ‘Professor Shonku.” comments that the setting of the speculative fiction in an actual sense reflects the reality of the world by tracing the perilous journey of the protagonist, Professor Shonku and it resembles the perilous journey undertaken by the protagonist, Meiji in this case.

The Youngest Uncle struggles to provide a safe passage across the radioactive barren land, but he fails to come up with an answer about her identity. Meiji's physical body doesn't progress in the natural order owing to chemical insertion and she psychologically as well as socially struggles to cope 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 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 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, the history of her natural birth, and the sacrifice of her mother and her biological father through a series of events that are haunting, disturbing, and more importantly shocking to humanity. The totalitarian rulers suppressed both women, nature, and the natural process of human evolution. 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 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 tremendous trauma that her presence was putting the three uncles in jeopardy. When Meiji is forced to wear a prosthetic male penis 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 women's companionship and the basic human right to exist as a free individual in an androcentric society in the dystopian Science Fiction, *Escape*. In this way, an attempt has been made to explore the trials and tribulations of the woman protagonist in Manjula Padmanabhan's world-famous novel *Escape*.

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