

Dying Women and Already Dead Land: An Ecofeminist Reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*

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Abstract

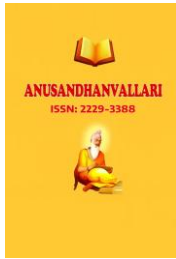
Ecofeminism conceptualizes that exploitation of both women and environment results from the patriarchal setup of the world. Dystopian fiction have not only been warning us of the dangers of an autocratic regime powered by potential technological advancements, but have also portrayed how the nature and land forever changes in such a dystopian fate. This paper intends to analyze Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* – a feminist dystopian fiction with an eco-dystopian narrative that follows the life of the only known woman survivor in a post-apocalyptic country called “The Brother Land” formed after the national femicide; new humans (men) are genetically cloned under the iron-fist rule of their cloned Generals brothers who were coded to eradicate the remaining ‘vermins in hide’ and spread their ideology throughout the world.

Keywords: feminist science fiction, ecofeminism, speculative fiction, eco-dystopia.

Introduction

Ecofeminism posits that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment stem from patriarchal and capitalist systems. The world, which seemingly celebrates the ‘nature’ of women – her ability to bring a new life into the world uses the same aspect to tighten her boundaries, limiting her autonomy. Also, nature plays a prominent role in every culture around the world – nature is worshipped, romanticised, and feared. But as the world adopted capitalism, a new culture emerged in which nature is being subjugated. Only a few per cent of people, who sit at the top of the social ladder, benefit from this social structure, while the remaining delegate hard for crumbs, forever climbing the Sisyphus hill. This is one of the top reasons why Marxists oppose the capitalist system, which does not focus on social justice, only on profit generated.

Speaking in feminist terms, women are yet to be given the equal pay and amenities that their male co-workers currently have. Many women are agoraphobic, as the other world is designed to alienate them, always reminding them that it is indeed a man's world.



Padmanabhan's 2008 novel *Escape* chains all the above-discussed social issues and presents it through the story of Meiji, the only female survivor being helped to escape the country by her Uncle. Padmanabhan's works reached the limelight after her 2003 play *Harvest* received the Onassis Prize for Theatre in Greece. After writing a play about the organ transplant trade, the writer started to ideate a story about the declining rate of the female population, especially in India, and then, after several creative thought processes, *Escape* was created.

Behind every dystopian fiction is a motive that was charged by the socio-political scenario around that time. When asked about which conditions contributed to writing *Escape* in an interview, Manjula Padmanabhan replied, "For all practical purposes, we are in the grip of World War III. What most people around the globe are experiencing right now is a dystopia in the present. My novel is only mildly fictional and futuristic — much of what happens in it is within the realm of possibility." (Ramchandani)

The writer also said that she did not start the novel with the idea of bringing women's issues, but she kept the course of the novel in a potential dystopia that may happen as certain situations in our world right now match with dystopian fiction of the last century.

Ecofeminism

The term ecofeminism was coined by French author and activist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death), where she called women to lead a revolution that necessitates forming a new relationship between man and nature and with other genders on the spectrum. The goal of ecofeminism is to create an "egalitarian, collaborative society in which there is no one dominant group." (Merchant 193- 291)

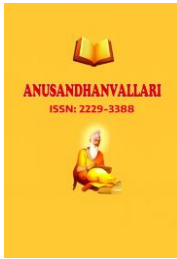
Ecofeminists also believe that there is an inherent connection between women and nature. Caroline Merchant, in her work *Radical Ecology*, which was published in 2005, explains that,

"Ecofeminist actions address the contradiction between production and reproduction. Women attempt to reverse the assaults of production on both biological and social reproduction by making problems visible and proposing solutions. Although women may or may not identify themselves explicitly as ecofeminists, they nevertheless assume or act on the connections between women and nature." (Merchant 193)

Dystopian fiction is one of the popular media in contemporary times to incorporate ecological issues to bring light upon them and also to warn us of the future that awaits us if the patriarchal and capitalist systems do not get reformed. Like Padmanabhan, most of the time, dystopian fiction writers, or science fiction writers in general, may not consciously work on a piece of fiction to bring awareness about a social issue; our world has come to a position where the writers cannot exclude its background and current dystopian scenario of natural calamities and climate change.

The land in a dystopian world would already be dead, and the women would hang on the last strand of the rope; women exist in classic dystopias devoid of fundamental and reproductive rights, and personality. Science fiction was dominated by male writers, and during its evolving time, the world was disturbed by war and the political games of a certain few who took the lives of millions around the world. So, naturally, the writers leaned in to write about the potential dangers of excessive political power, but almost always forgot about how it affects women who are already a minority with less representation and with fewer rights than men. One thing that never changed in dystopian fiction is the depiction of nature as a wasteland – one aspect that all science fiction authors may agree with.

Padmanabhan's *Escape* is a dystopian novel that talks about female infanticide, and alienation of women and abhorration of her reproductive rights – issues that pertain in contemporary South Asian countries, especially



in India where an actual law passed in parliament in 1994 called Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act according to which, determining the gender of foetus by any means is forbidden. This act was passed to stop the selective abortion of female foetuses around that time.

According to the National Family Health Survey held in 2020-21, India's sex ratio is now 1020 females to 1000 males, but in rural areas, the sex ratio is 985 females to 1000 males. Though there are acts to protect the rights of women, from foetus to elderly, and also the technological advancements that unchain women from their respective houses, the social reception is asynchronous. This novel follows Meiji and her journey of self-identity, learning about 'her kind' through the laborious journey through the wasteland, her escape out of the Brother Land.

Exploitation of Women

"Up to the age of twelve, the little girl is as strong as her brothers, and she shows the same mental powers; there is no field where she is debarred from engaging in rivalry with them. If, well before puberty and sometimes even from early infancy, she seems to us to be already sexually determined, this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom her to passivity, coquetry, maternity; it is because the influence of upon the child is a factor almost from the start, and thus she is indoctrinated with her vocation from her earliest years." (273, Beauvoir)

This quote from the chapter 'Childhood' from Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* sums up existence and the path of Meiji, the protagonist of the story. Beauvoir's general reflection in the transitive period of a woman's life is the literal reality of Meiji, a girl who has to go through the phase of discovering her womanhood, being the only known female in the country.

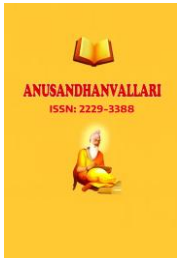
Meiji, too, until the age of twelve, was oblivious about what comes hereafter. Her uncles brought her up with knowledge about the long-lost world with the remaining literature, but not as a girl. She is also kept in the dark about how her three uncles use her to hunt men who are in search of remaining little girls to own them for pleasure. Up until the age of twelve, Meiji did not know why her Uncles made her stand in front of random men and then kill them once they set their eyes on her.

The eyes of the last knight disturbed Meiji, something her uncles are unaware of – this signifies that her inherent identity is what made her react, despite not knowing the knight's intentions of sexually harming her.

Meiji's three uncles – Eldest, Middle and Youngest own a private estate with semi-cyborg servants called drones to take care of their farms, mansion, and also to attend to them whenever needed. Meiji's Uncles belong to a minority of privileged estate owners who could hold onto their wealth and enjoy the privilege of the newfound country by catering to the Generals, particularly to the General of their zone. Despite their friendship, the Generals constantly inspect the mansion while going to get entertained by the estate owners. Meiji is usually hidden somewhere in the mansion whenever the Generals visit. She is also made to wear an artificial penis to protect her real identity. Meiji follows everything her Uncles tell her to, until they told her about their 'plan' which changed Meiji's world forever.

During the initial days of the journey, Meiji's sudden exposure to the outer world made her naturally curious; she would constantly pester Youngest, who agreed to take her to the destination. What made Meiji more difficult for Youngest is her growing curiosity about her changing body. Youngest was very certain that Meiji would detest him once she grew up. "You'll look back upon your whole life so far, and you'll hate everything about it. You'll wonder why you were born, and you'll question every stick and stone of reality," says Youngest to Meiji, who asked what will happen once she grows up.

To a girl who's been coddled, provided lavishly, and also looked up to her uncles, especially Youngest, parents cannot comprehend the gravity of the situation. Also, Youngest knows that Meiji will hate him because



she will start to look at him as a man, because Youngest has an attraction to the developing teenager's thoughts, which he fights back onerously.

In general, the transition from girlhood to womanhood is rough – girls who were treated just like their brothers are suddenly expected to master the household chores, while also being scolded to maintain distance from other boys in and out of the household. The girls are constantly reminded of their future in their in-laws' house, and are prepared for it accordingly. Girls are thus moulded into women that their respective culture approves of. They usually wouldn't be able to explore their womanhood, and this even grows a hatred for who they are, i.e., a female.

Meiji perceived from the previous conversation with Youngest that her body would change into a monster. She calls her developing breasts as horns and wishes to cut them off, so she can be as 'normal' as everyone and doesn't need to hide or escape anymore. Meiji derived this idea from her Uncles', making her wear the artificial penial prosthetic to hide her genitals. Meiji, at this point, badly wants to go back to the estate and continue her life the way it was. She doesn't like it when her uncle touches her, or coerces her to abide by his words.

Meiji's childhood is also signified by her pretend friends, Mister Piggy and Mister Frog. The puppy she rescued and took care of signified her innocent nature. By chapter thirty-eight, Meiji would lose all three, which signifies that her childhood and innocence also departed.

"Only then did she realize that she'd left her old friend lying at the foot of that tree in the mango orchard... A profound sorrow welled up inside her. Not that she needed that specific mirror to summon him... Yet now that the mirror was gone, there was a finality to it. First, Mister Piggy, then the puppy, now Mister Frog. Whomsoever or whatever she grew close to was lost, died or fell away." (325, Padmanabhan)

Exploitation of Nature

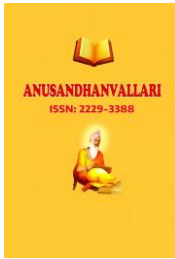
Parallel to the story of Meiji, the novel provides excerpts from the interview between one of the generals and an interviewer from another nation. The Generals are cyborg clones who rule the post-apocalyptic country called the Brother Land, which might once be India. It is said in the novel that the people who created the General also started a nuclear war globally that changed the world map forever, and also left the Brother Land alone. But Brother Land is able to survive because some countries buy fuel, thus passively contributing to the General's ambition of changing the entire world 'male'.

The interviewer reveals that "their methods are condemned the world over and that the name of their newly-found nation has been struck from the record." (Padmanabhan, 90)

The tension between the interviewer and the General is prevalent throughout the course of their interview, where the General boasts about being isolated from the rest of the world while also wanting to reach out to the world to gain an audience.

From the background given to us, it can be understood that, while refusing to officiate the newfound country, certain countries have ties with Brother Land purely for profit, knowing very well that they are enabling the land governed by cyborgs to develop even more sinister ways to spread their ideology throughout the world.

The land of the Brother Land is not entirely a nuclear wasteland. As mentioned before, only certain privileged groups have the luxury to maintain farms to produce food or to maintain the aesthetics; beyond that, nobody has the time to think about reviving the dead land as they themselves keep their head a few feet above water, anticipating the Generals to sweep them off existence anytime soon.



The palace of the Generals is also described without any greenery nearby. There weren't any functioning windows, and the entire fortress is sealed with its own air-purifying plant inside. The Generals have a mass of young men called "The Boyz' who were directly responsible for the General's security and well-being." (Padmanabhan, 39)

The Generals are identical clones who work as a single sentient being – they can hear other clones' thoughts and can converse without being near to each other, and without even opening their mouths, through the transmitters planted in their jaws.

Initially, the 'far-sighted ancestor' aimed to create a race of superhumans and invented the ground-breaking cloning technology, whereby a man can clone himself to create his next generation, who can carry his legacy. This, in turn, made them erase women from their nation, as the only reason they tolerated women was because of their ability to give birth, the General says in an interview. And since new technology allowed them to selectively create strong men to rule, and domestic, dim-witted drones to take the place of women and their chores, the like-minded people and their clones created this revolution of eliminating 'vermins'.

"Interviewer: How did your ancestor finance his project?

General: By accepting money from foreign governments in exchange for storing nuclear wastes.

Interviewer: He became a highly paid garbage collector, in short-

General: Irrelevant." (Padmanabhan, 255)

The interviewer also points out that the system the Generals have created for themselves is not perfect, as they project. She found out that there is a gap in their communication, and no matter how much the General insists they are 'many bodies, one self', the novel hints that there are certain differences the Generals consciously make in their physical appearance as well as in the way they talk.

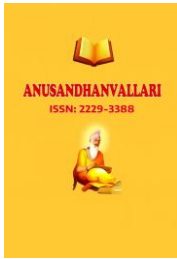
The land too was violated along with the national femicide. Some working-class families have tried to hide their daughters, but The Boyz would always find them and murder them on the spot, as they do not have the space and wealth to hide and feed their daughters without getting sniffed at.

In such a grim situation, the land is not even in the discussion of being revived or seeking justice. The novel, though it does not actively give opinions about the land, keeps on narrating the places wherever Meiji and Youngest go, talking about its past glory and the wreck it has become. The animals, apart from the camel, are not often seen as they are either hunted and eaten or otherwise used only for labour. The absence of descriptions of some common insects and animals suggests they might have even gone extinct.

Only through the interview, the General faces questions that his citizens never dare to even think of – so in some cases, he couldn't answer them, and even tried to insult the interviewer for being a woman, as only 'vermins would ask such questions.'

It is a matter of time until the land is entirely filled with radioactive waste, and it justifies General's urgency to spread his reign all over the world. The General, in a way, is a capitalist tyrant who eliminates those who are at the bottom of the social pyramid once their existence becomes obsolete to his cause. The ideology of the General may backfire, or create another world war – but that is what is happening as of now.

The current wars – both direct and cold – consist of attacking and taking the land of the marginalised and then eliminating them, treating both people and land as property. People in power, like the General, whose ego, misogyny and power trip would never let them accept the truth, would always lead to a global disaster.



Conclusion

Ecofeminism in dystopian topos underscores the systematic subjugation of women and nature, thereby linking gendered oppression and misogyny to a broader ecological and sociopolitical subjugation. Padmanabhan's portrayal of the gender identity problem and ecological collapse by passively comparing them within a dystopian context redefines the feminist dystopian trope, where it formerly represented women's quest for liberation. This novel is a cry for help for the land, and for the women who have a closer connection with it; anything that affects the land affects those who work with it closely – working-class and marginalised women and men.

An ecosystem thrives when there is balance- any power that tends to create imbalance in any means is an infection that needs to be pushed out of the society to protect our biome, environmentally and socially. Ultimately, Manjula Padmanabhan's work enforces a re-evaluation of the relationship among man, woman, and nature.

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