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Gender, Technological Dominance and Resistance in Dystopia: Manjula Padmanabhan 's ESCAPE through feminist lens

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Abstract

Feminist dystopias are closely related to critical dystopias, while criticizing the prevailing social inequalities, it resist the ultimate catastrophic circumstances through the incorporation of utopian hope. Raffaella Baccolini has given the credit for defining feminist dystopias under critical dystopias. He, in collaboration with Tom Moylan extended the following definition of critical dystopias:

"Texts that maintain a utopian impulse by foregrounding resistance, even in the most oppressive conditions"

It is important to understand that feminist dystopias are not treated as a distant genre; nevertheless, Literature is brimming with such works which fulfil the requirements of being considered feminist dystopia. The easiest way to understand the feminist dystopian work is that it uses dystopian narratives to exaggerate and intensifies the existing set of evils comprising; gender inequality, oppression, subjugation of women to speculate a monstrous future. It deals with the "bad place", the dystopian world where one gender is being oppressed by the other one in various ways, which includes the limitations of reproductive rights also. That one gender is often females, who suffers under the tyrannical state and any kind of violation leads to critical retribution. Even though, feminist dystopias demonstrates a terrifying, appalling society however: it also works like a warning and calls for a change. It incorporates the 'utopian hope' in the form of rebellion or resistance against the prevailing order and eventually the justice and social order is achieved. Utopian hope brings out the fact that things can be drastic in future, but transformation is not implausible and can be achieved through revolution. While writing this research paper I carry this aim to answer the question that in what ways feminist dystopias works to critique the society as well as inspire us to transform it to avoid the extremity of the evils. I will be analysing Manjula Padmanabhan 's "Escape" set in an unnamed misogynistic world driven by technology rather than humanistic values and is devoid of females. The story revolves around the female Protagonist Meiji, who is the "last of her own kind" and is being protected by her three uncles: the eldest, middle and the youngest who symbolizing the three levels of patriarchal protection and control. This "no women's land" is the grotesque description of unchecked misogyny and power distribution. This land, which once seen women as merely the reproductive objects, now eradicate the entire race of women through technological advancements, reflecting on the imbalance between science and moral values. Manjula Padmanabhan through this intriguing story not only shed light on the overreach of technology, lack of humanistic values, extreme patriarchal control, and misogyny, but also shakes the world into waking up to the transformation- before this conjectured world becomes a reality. The study employs feminist criticism to explore the themes of gender inequality, patriarchal structure and misogyny through a close textual reading. Additionally, concepts from critical dystopias will also be applied to study the narrative within the framework of feminist dystopias.

Keywords: Feminist dystopia, social critique, transformation, gender roles, utopian hope

Introduction

In alignment with the objective of my Research paper, first we require to examine the inter-relation between feminist dystopia and feminist criticism to validate the framework through which Escape is analysed. We will apply the assertions of feminist criticism and feminist dystopia to "escape" to explore how such works evoke the sense of terror that ultimately urges transformation. Both literary frameworks interrogates the patriarchal structure, extreme authoritarianism, gender disparity while advocating for an egalitarian society. However, it is incumbent upon us to differentiate between the two. Feminist dystopia, a subgenre of

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dystopian fiction, often employs hyperbole to surmise a grim future, serving as a cautionary tale that urges societal transformation. In contrast, feminist criticism functions as a bridge through which subtle textual elements are decoded, allowing readers to discern the deeper meaning author

intends to convey. Let us from a chart, outlining the fundamental characteristics of feminist criticism and feminist dystopia to grasp the crux of this paper in an easier way.

Feminist criticism	Feminist dystopia
Sex or gender; determining the difference between both the entities	Totalitarian society; enforcing extreme surveillance over the population
Protection or possession; disguised male dominance	Technological dominance; destroying natural order
Control over language; halting self-awareness	Moral or emotional decay; flooding the society with machines devoid of any compassion
Lack of knowledge; reinforcing female fragility	Power dynamics; supremacy of the generals
Rise of resistance; a possibility for forming an egalitarian society	Utopian hope; emerging in the form of resistance or non-conformity, challenging the sustainability of this unnatural order.

Sex and gender: To embark on this critical exploration, it is essential to comprehend how gender is conceptualised within feminist criticism. Simon de Beauvoir, Judith butler, Virginia woolf, are among the many influential critics associated with feminist criticism. Judith butler's understanding of gender is closely aligned to Simon de Beauvoir's famous assertion: "one is not born, but becomes a woman". In butler's view, gender is not a biological fact but it is socially constructed identity. She distinguishes sex from gender, asserting that sex is the biological identity but gender is social identity shaped by culturally imposed behavioural expectations linked to one particular sex. When we read Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*, we realizes how Meiji remains unaware of her identity due to the way she has been raised. Although, she is biologically female, her self-awareness of that identity is absent, highlighting the crucial role of social conditioning in the construction of gender. she believed herself to be just like her brothers are however, as the story unfolds various incidents leads her to realise her unique identity. In the chapter 12th, when meiji is on her way to south with the youngest she expresses her curiosity to know about the changes she is going to experience. This conversation between them highlights meiji's innocence and her ignorance of her own self. She cannot comprehend what is going to happen to her body. The youngest explains that once these changes begin and she learns the truth, she will no longer be able to feel the same way about them- underscoring the grave consequences of keeping her unaware of her own identity.

"but the real changes won't be visible. For instance, I can tell you right now that you'll begin to hate me. I can't be sure exactly when, but eventually we probably won't be able to sit in the same room for longer than it takes for you to spit on me- no; no; this part is wholly true. I cant give it to you in writing! 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."

Protection or possession: In the women-less world of *escape*, where Meiji is the only survival of nearly complete femicide but her bothers decide to conceal the truth from her. Although the youngest one grapples with the question of how to address her inquisitiveness when she approaches adolescence, the eldest and the middle remain firm in their decision. While this act often perceived as an attempt to protect her from general's regime, a feminist reading reveal it as an exercise of patriarchal control. This autonomy of the three brothers symbolizes a male- dominated society, where females don't possess any right to think, to make decision

for themselves. In *Escape* also, It is her three brothers who make decision on behalf of her- deciding what she learns, how she lives. This is where protection transforms into possession. Feminist criticism exposes this possession, disguised as protection by questioning the absence of female agency in decision-making. Females often succumb to the suppression in the name of safety due to the lack of knowledge and autonomy. In *escape* also, the three brothers acts as obstacles, limiting Meiji's the knowledge, symbolizing the oppressive effects of the system in which they exist.

Lack of knowledge or rise of resistance: Kate Millette in her seminal work "Sexual Politics" discusses the male supremacy and how female are subjugated due to their ignorance. *She asserts "if knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women"*. This lack of knowledge and exposure among women fuels patriarchy and leave them with no option other than to blindly follow what they are told. until now, the brothers had concealed every bit of information form her and then suddenly they exposed everything at once, which was indigestible for her. She was distraught by the fact that all this while she had remined unaware of so many fundamental things. She does not even know the pronoun "she". When the youngest tells her about her real name and her mother, she refers to her as "he", explicitly delineating the extremity of her ignorance. This scene demonstrates the significance of language in shaping self-awareness and identity, and reveals how gender politics in totalitarian society of *Escape* runs through the control of language.

In the chapter no.14th, when Meiji and the youngest were on their way to waste the youngest explains to her the entire system that generals have created by deleting cities and people phlegmatically. He even compared the generals to cruel sculpture who shapes reality that they believe would be a better one. During this conversation the youngest described two kinds of sculptures, one who shapes stones and rocks by cutting the pieces of it and the other ones who shapes reality by cutting the people and cities. When asked, who matters more; people or rocks, youngest instinctively answered people however Meiji paused for a second and then she frantically replied;

"I don't know. Wouldn't you say that what you have done with me is a little bit like shaping rock? You and uncle zero and uncle one- you have been sculpting my life, haven't you? By removing chunks of it, by not telling me about the stuff that I should have known and now you are trying to fix

it, except of course you can't. you can't return bits of marble to a sculpture, once it's been cut"

Through this conversation, Meiji draws a comparison between her brothers and the generals, both of them harboured this delusion that concealing information was somehow an act of protection or improvement. When things become uncontrollable, without considering her mental situation they began revealing everything at once. This conversation not only mirrors her anger and hatred towards her brother but also her inner turmoil and helplessness.

In the chapter no. 8th when Meiji was brought into the open air she felt extremely unsettled, as this experience lies outside her concealed and regulated routine. She desperately wants to return to her enclosed space, yet she cannot defy the orders of her uncle one. Even when she asked the reason of this sudden outing, her uncle asked her to simply obey. Later, When her uncle asks her to drop her pants and tie a prosthetic penis to her body, her mind is flooded with so many questions- yet she keeps them to herself only. In the same chapter, when Meiji manages to avoid looking directly at her uncle's face against his commands, he strongly grips her face that she says is hurting her. However, when he remains unyielding, she stopped resisting.

"stop it, that hurts". she jerked her head this way and that, trying to dislodge his grip on her face. Instead he tightened it. She grabbed the man's thick wrist with both her hands and struggled to loosen his hold on her face, the efforts causing snuffles to break from her mouth and nose, and tears to be squeezed from her eyes. when it was clear she would not succeed, she stopped mobbing and waited.

This scene reflects the futility of a female's effort to attain liberation against the patriarchal authority, yet it is the moment when the seed of resistance blooms in Meiji's heart. Meiji's own existence in a world devoid of women marks the inception of resistance against the totalitarian society of the generals. As the story progresses, her brothers call her for a meeting under the open sky, subtly explaining the dangers surrounding her existence. Until now, she had perceived her life as normal, so when asked about the changes approaching her, she can only think of becoming taller. She is utterly confused and is unable to respond; however when she retrospectively recalls how her uncle once hurt her due to his strong tall frame, she instinctively replies in affirmative.

"I remembered how he just put his hand out and squeezed my face and how it hurt and how I hated him for doing it. I realized suddenly that the only reason he could do it was that he was bigger and taller than me. And it made me cross just thinking about it. I opened my mouth and those were the words fell out of it: I want to grow taller. Yes. That's what I want"

It was the first time that Meiji stood her ground and in, steady voice, made a decision for herself. Resistance lies at the heart of feminist criticism and dystopian fiction both. It embodies utopian hope-a possibility for change- in its absence, no change is ever possible.

Totalitarian society: Dystopian fiction is often recognized by its totalitarian society, enforcing extreme surveillance over the population. In escape as well, the generals have created a system managed by the replicas of human, referred to as drones. This structure also comprises a chain of generals who are themselves mere replicas; however due to the device attached to their jaws, they all think alike, making

it arduous to escape the system. when the interviewer asked the general about his connection to other generals, he answered in a very cunning way;

"transceivers permanently embedded in our jaws. When one of us talks, all hear. We think as one"

The entire race of the generals look identical to each other with minor detailing such as a mole, slight excess of hair. Even their fingerprints, footprints are same, proving how meticulously they have been designed. They are always accompanied by the four personal drones which is said to be the only living beings as others are merely replicas.

Even the names and the language are controlled by the generals. Each year, a list of approved names is released, and the citizens must comply with the order, any violations leads to grave repercussions. when meiji is given the choice to select her name, the youngest explains to her that she must choose from the official list- and that her real name goes against the naming system.

"you know there are reasons why we often can't do what we want- I have explained that there is a tribe of generals who rule over us? Okay. Well, names are amongst the things they restrict our use of. Every year, they release a list of official names and they insist that all names must come only from that list"

The totalitarian regime extends beyond human control, dictating the time of sunrise and sunset and even fabricating their own clouds, stars and moon. This grotesque manipulation of natural order not only manifests their authoritarian grip but also the dominance of technology in overpowering nature to sustain their unnatural order.

"dawn was fixed at 5:30 a.m. and sunset at 6:45p.m. there were randomized clouds and blue sky during the day, crescent moon, and stars at night"

Being the estate owners, the brothers believe themselves to be the friend of the generals however, in a conversation, the generals impetuously bring up the fact that their friendship is closely tied to the brothers' obedience to their orders- consecrating the generals' egocentric set of beliefs or preferences.

"so do not grow comfortable off the fat of our so-called friendship and our past associations, my brothers. We generals are friends only so long as our will is not crossed. And you are our friends only so long as you understand that"

Technological dominance: Dystopian fiction often makes the use of technology to annihilate the natural order, featuring a world which is on the verge of its moral, emotional, ethical devastation due to the extremity of the things. Technology and nature both are highly contrasted to each other and technology's dominance over nature can be extensively destructive. The regime of general comprises everything that goes against the natural order- the absence of women's race, the human replicas in the form of drones, the food capsules they consume for energy even. It is important to note that in a dystopian fiction, the one who leads invariably rejects the natural system, providing impetus to the dehumanization. During a conversation with the brother, the general in a very hostile tone expressed his extreme hatred towards nature.

"the word nation is made ugly on account of its association with nativity, with birth, with nature and, by association, with excess. Nature is excessive and I abhor it for that reason"

He even rejects the essential role of women in the process of birth, which is deeply unsettling. When the three brothers exposes him to the stunning performance of the juggler, the general is highly impressed and expresses a desire to possess his body. His remarks illuminate the disturbing methods through which the regime has managed to prevent the extinction of their race in the complete absence of women.

"what is the worst he can do? Kill himself? But so what? We will have his body. This is all we need" I have no patience with these conceited specialists! Uniqueness and talents belong to the past: today we can duplicate and standardize anyone, anything. Yes. This juggler might cease to breathe, but his talent, brilliance will live on forever, in the hundreds of his replications"

This exemplifies how he sustains his totalitarian regime without acknowledging the presence of women. This remarks of the general not only embodies his despise towards nature but also his deeply bizarre aspirations of turning the world into mechanism devoid of organism or naturality. Through his ideology, he not only eradicates an entire race but also its significance. His regime is completely populated by replicas- mechanical imitations devoid of any organic life. They create duplicates, rendering authentic life inconsequential in their eyes.

Death plays a significant role in the entire natural order; however, it has also been dismantled by the clone system of generals. When the interviewer asked him about death, that how they would sustain themselves when death eventually comes- he proudly replies:

"we are identical. One more or one less- what does it matter? When one drops out, there is always another to take his place"

The chain of generals is the depiction of meticulously designed technology, yet it has its own flaws- one just need to explore it to dismantle the entire system. All of them can hear what one general hears, turning the system into an inescapable escapade. Although it seems truly difficult because of their interconnectedness, the middle nevertheless elaborated on the limitation of their system also. The brother's hold the aim to move beyond their general's reach without being detected by the drones but when the youngest asked about the threat of being caught when the other general detects them, the middle responded,

"I don't believe it. They have got some type of communal audio, yes. I imagine it expresses itself as a continuous background murmur. But communal video? Not likely. The effect would be of a continuous stream of hallucinations from each general to all of his brother generals. They would be paralysed by an information overloaded"

This stance exhibits the limitation of technological dominance as well as their authoritarian aspects. Even though they are designed painstakingly- with capabilities to hear from afar, to control things effortlessly- limitations are still attached. As the brother defines, they can be paralyzed by the overload of the information, proving technology fallible. Even the drones are incapable of using reasoning in state of failure, unlike the natural creation of human being. They are destined to follow whatever has been commanded to them; if it fails, then they simply wait for the other command, making the entire system appear fallible and escapable.

"by the time the sun touched that desolate spot and the servant woke up, he would find himself unaccountable alone

in the featureless plain, with two days rations of food and water beside him. Following the drill in which he had been trained, he would simply wait until the next camel team came this way. Drones were not adapted for independent thought or action. If they could not follow the instructions they had been given, they would make no attempt to improvise"

By utilizing such flaws in the system of the generals, Manjula padmanabhan endeavours to render the point that no system is ultimately impeccable. Even in the extremity of the apocalyptic thoughts, transformation is possible- it just needs one mindful effort

Moral or emotional decay: The general possess proud and contentment in the system he has established- one that is entirely devoid of women. He is filled with this belief that their system is better than the entire old one, and he desires his system to be elongated. In a conversation with the three brothers, the general pontificates about the advantages of his system and also shares his aspirations. This reflects the harmful aspirations that the generals uphold and also the profound dehumanization they underwent.

"we will be honoured by the future for what we erased in the past"

"I am writing about the infinite present. Neither dreaming of the future nor dwelling in the past. It is a matter of great profundity, to remain wholly in the blaze of the immediate now. When I think of the habits of past civilizations- the waste- the profligacy- ah! I can only wonder that we ever struggled out of the bog to arrive at our present glory"

He and his associates refer to the entire race of women as a "vermin tribe". The use of such a derogatory term to describe womanhood starkly delineates a profound moral decay. Vermin refers to useless animals or pests considered to have no utility in the life of the dominant race. The term symbolically exhibits the trivial status of women within patriarchy- where a woman is perceived only as the other of man. Simon de Beauvoir in her seminal work "second sex" also asserts that women is invariably seen as 'other' of man- where man is the subject and woman is the object. The general even called the process of women's eradication "drain-cleaning", comparing them to excrement demonstrates the vile ideology that stained them.

Through the incorporation of such a dehumanizing term in escape, Manjula padmanabhan not only represents the othering of women but also demonstrates the extremity of such destructive thought, which may eventually result in the elimination of the entire race in the coming decades. The generals have established a yellow zone also, where women's existence is restricted. The colour yellow is often associated with warning or disease, the use of such colour to restrict the existence of women is also the representation of their ideological decay.

When, during a conversation, the general explains the conditions of being friends with them to the brothers it highlights the immeasurable loss of morality. Even the pure relation of friendship is conditional in their miserable mechanical world. The general egocentrically consecrates that their friendship can be sustained through obedience. In contrast, we witness friendship of the gypsy and the youngest, illuminating the significance of humanity in relationships. In the first instance, friendship exists between machine like being and the humans, rooted in power and obedience. The other friendship smoulders between two

humans seems more organic and heart warming watered by the genuine humanity, giving glimpses of true emotional bonds.

Even in their world of wretched beings with no emotional depth, the youngest encounters gypsy, an apparent friend, who happens to know who Meiji's true identity. Instead of threatening them, he offers the youngest a suggestion based on his personal experience with Meiji. He even warns him of the consequences of not taking his advice seriously-to disguise her thoroughly.

"He has a scent that I have not encountered in many years. You will tell me, I am sure, that it's only his youth to which I am responding and that all young creatures have this quality of freshness and tenderness. But my nose tells me a different story. A story that has ceased to exist in our land, and that I had not expected to smell again in my lifetime"

He warns the youngest, "take my word for it, you will regret it, if you ignore my warning"

Bottling Meiji's blooming youth, the tenderness it spreads all around seems to be an arduous task for the youngest. Nature can never be denied or concealed; this phenomenon makes its appearance to the youngest. Gypsy assists the youngest in disguising Meiji's presence, affirms that the world is not entirely corrupted. Even though it is brimming with machines, devoid of endearment, people like gypsy slow the pace of moral or emotional decay only by existing. The gypsy even suggested a name for Meiji- bird, referring to the freedom from her ordeal.

Utopian Hope: The existence of utopian hope functions as a possibility of transformation in the darkest of times, as seen in dystopian fiction. Utopian hope glows like embers, smouldering underneath waiting to reignite change. Utopian hope makes change appear possible even when nothing feels right. It often makes its presence felt in the form of rebellion or as an inclination to not confirm the existing order. Even though the possibility of failure always lingers, resistance remains reluctant to succumb to extensive anarchy or injustice. In escape, too, even everything seems dark at the surface level the eradication of women race, the extreme surveillance under drones, the supremacy of generals, nevertheless the brother's attempt to hide the existence of Meiji, the only woman in a women-less world of the generals is itself a revolution. From the feminist lens, we may explore the loopholes in their concealment of Meiji, still this fact can not be denied: they initiated rebellion against the regime of the generals by preserving the only woman- Meiji. All three brother have been planning to get Meiji out of the generals' reach, however the journey proves to not to be an easy one. In the world of mechanical beings, all three brothers possess traits that fuels their resistance toward the tyranny of the generals- Meiji's three uncles, the eldest one symbolises- the prophetic vision, the middle exemplifies- intelligence, the youngest epitomises- empathy and strong human feelings. Even in the beginning of the story, the youngest happens to witness strong emotional attraction towards Meiji. He embarks on this tedious journey with a quest to take Meiji reach out of the general's regime. In anticipation of escaping the appalling world of generals, the youngest sacrifices his very nature of being emotional. During a conversation, when Meiji gets emotional and expresses her desire to return to the estate, we witness another version of the youngest- One who acts strong and

demands Meiji to be hard as nail as well. He explains to her, in a sturdy voice, that although their chances of success are infinitesimal, they still need to remain optimistic. This is another side of resistance- one that is detached from fragile sentiments- for only then can the collapse of the tyranny become possible.

"Anger is better than self-pity- anger, hate, bitterness-these are going to be your only companion in the weeks and months ahead- and they will make you tough as nails and hard as iron. Whatever softness they was in your life, it's gone forever"

Conclusion

According to Collins dictionary, name Meiji in Japanese refers to 'enlightened peace'. It is a strong narrative of human victory over the tyrannical power. It presents a journey towards enlightenment and peace even at the darkest of times, making the transformation look possible. Meiji's transformation from being a little vulnerable girl to a matured one who is capable of holding and expressing her emotions symbolizes the expected transformation of the women. It embodies the message that being stoic is no longer the solution of their ordeal and they need to take stand for themselves. Manjula padmanabhan gave this story an open-ending which gives birth to assortments of possibilities. It is same with the real life events, when an uprising stems the result is not certain. It can lead to failure but the possibility of success is always open. The open ending originates hope and gives impetus to our inclination to bring changes as soon as possible. People born after the change were told various stories about the eradication of women. As per the narratives, women's only utilisation was to breed children and they were fragile creatures who invariably needed the protection of the men. Later on, the entire race suffered a secret illness that eventually lead them towards destruction. Manjula padmanabhan, creatively demonstrates the manipulation that narratives commit. This is how society function-by infusing false narratives into the minds of both women or men. It embeds in our mind an uncanny feeling- that if these false narratives continue, we are not far from the world she imagines. Even though this narrative give rise to deeply restless feelings however; the collective efforts of the brothers and meiji's own courage to leave the torturous world give impetus to the social transformation. Manjula padmanabhan's setting of the entire story has strong resemblance to India, even the characters wears veil, dhoti, and eats rotis, lassi, giving evidence to our assumption. Indian society where in every minute so many girls get raped, kidnapped, missed seems to be the authentic setting for the narrative. The decreasing sex ratio in the world's largest economy indicates an alarming situation in recent times. In India every minute case of a bride being burned for dowry is reported. According to the 2011 census, India's current child sex-ratio is 914 females per 1000 males which is the lowest one. Through Escape, Manjula padmanabhan has not only presented a futuristic vision of our country but also give us a warning about unimaginable terrors we would witness if present situation of violence against women continues unabated. She has lead us to our future based on the recent set of conditions, if not rectified in time. Our ideology, our situation need to be corrected if we don't wish this futuristic vision to become our living reality.

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