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CONFIGURATING FEMINIST DYSTOPIA: AN ANALYSIS OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *ESCAPE*

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Abstract:

Dystopia, has of late, become a modern-day phenomenon. It evokes disturbing imagery, and events of the contemporary times highlight that we are tragically living in a dystopian era. This dystopian era is sullied with bloodshed, chaos, murder, mayhem, killings and violence. The situation however, is most tragic and painful when it comes to women, who are the worst victims of violence in a dystopic everyday reality. Literature is a reflection of society and as such feminist dystopias act as acute responses to deep-rooted gender inequalities and serves as a cautionary tale about the impending dangers. This paper thereby is an attempt to theorize dystopia and configure the context of feminist dystopia and its historiography. In doing this, the primary focus will be on Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape* (2008) in an attempt to highlight the pertinent issues plaguing India particularly the situation of Indian women.

Keywords: Dystopia, Feminism, Feminist Dystopia, India, Utopia

The word 'dystopia' has evolved over time and its meanings and ramifications have been a witness to turbulent times and grotesque scenes. It is derived from two Greek words 'dus' and 'topos' and means a bad or unfavorable place. Dystopia is the opposite of utopia, which means an ideal place. Dystopia and dystopic conditions have always been in existence; varying only in degree. However, dystopia has become quite a phenomenon especially in the twentieth century. If we are to look closely, utopia and dystopia both are complimentary to one another and cannot exist without the other.

Thomas More coined the word 'utopia' in his seminal work *Utopia* (1516), which explores the concept of an ideal society through a fictional narrative. The book is a dialogue between Thomas More and Raphael Hythloday, a traveler describing the society of Utopia, which is based on communal harmony, lack of private property and content individuals. The treatise therefore is an exploration of political philosophy as it offers a critique of the contemporary socio-political and economic issues of 16th century Europe that bore witness to inequality, religious intolerance and large-scale corruption not just in terms of materialism but morals too. The very term 'utopia' derived from Greek however, means 'no place'. So, it would not be wrong to point out that utopia can never exist in reality as there can be no place where all the individuals are content, and are intolerant to one another's likes and dislikes. Thus, utopia is only a cherished and desired space- a space that one can only long for but not applicable in reality. Human wants are unlimited and many a times, these wants have led to dissatisfaction and discontentment.

Dystopia however, has always been in existence. If dystopia is the opposite of utopia, then the world has pretty much been an unhappy and not so ideal place. The two World Wars, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the discontentment that followed Industrial Revolution and the growing nuclear attack concerns of 21st century and so on bears testimony to the fact that the world has been a witness to catastrophic violence, mayhem and killings. The world as we know it has become a dreary dreadful dystopian space. This space however, has especially been unkind to women. Like all other things, utopian and dystopian thought process and practices have also been gendered. If utopia is a favorable and ideal place then dystopia is an everyday reality for women thereby attesting that utopia exists only in theory, while dystopia exists both in theory and reality. However, both can also not survive without the other because of the human mind.

The human mind is a vast expanse of abysmal space, which functions on the basis of thought, desires and emotions, where perspectives often become the game-changer. And so, one man's utopia is often another man's dystopia. And while, the society, which is largely a patriarchal site, has progressed by leaps and bounds presenting a utopian perspective especially when it comes to the prowess of men, sadly, for women, it has become largely dystopic more so than ever because of the rising violence against women. The large-scale gender inequalities and the skewed sex ratio highlight the depressing



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dystopic reality. If literature is a reflection of society, then feminist dystopias act as acute responses to these deep-rooted gender inequalities and serves as a cautionary tale about the impending dangers.

Feminist dystopias reflect “fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail” (Claeys, 2017, p.5). Feminist dystopias explore and analyze societies where patriarchal oppression has eroded women’s rights, their identities and in fact, their bodily rights. Using the tool of speculative scenarios, feminist dystopias portray societies where women’s reproductive rights are either stripped off or they are forced into reproductive servitude, and their autonomy of self and their body is seized from them. Feminist dystopias thus highlight or rather serve as a cautionary tale of unchecked patriarchal power and practices. The feminist tales of dystopia thereby is often filled with female protagonists who resist and rebel. Unlike the conventional heroine bearing the traits of an ‘ideal woman’, the protagonists of female dystopias speak up, raise their voice in an attempt to destabilize the patriarchal hegemonical power and its agencies. And, in doing this, in more ways than so, feminist dystopias then offer a ray of hope in a dystopian world, whereby women can carve out a space for themselves in society and speak up for themselves and their rights, which the patriarchal society has in most cases denied them. Thus, it is seen that the “freedom of movement, economic self-determination, and sense of cultural centrality the last man presumes as his birthright were never shared equally across gender, race, and culture” (Rosenfeld, 2021, p.13).

Women, as Yuval-Davis (1997) points out are at “the marginal matrix of citizenship” (p. 5). It is in this context then, it becomes highly significant to understand how patriarchy works. Patriarchy allows:

men to control women’s sexuality, labour, production, reproduction and mobility by reinstating gender stereotypes. This control has developed historically and is institutionalised and legitimised by several ideologies, social practices, structures and institutions including family, religion, class, caste, race, ethnicity, education, media, law, state and society...Women are left economically exploited, socially suppressed and politically passive by such systemic processes of deprivation, oppression, exploitation and violence. Patriarchal constructions of knowledge perpetuate an ideology that reinforces male dominance within family, educational institutions, political culture and society at large. (Ray, 2024, pp. 25-26)

Patriarchy uses the agencies of language and ideology thus to perpetuate its own ambitions and hegemony. In fact, language has been one of the most fundamental tools to institutionalize patriarchy. Like all things, language has also been gendered. Men use variety of language and strong words to silence women while women on the other hand, have traditionally been denied access to free speech and thereby language. The conventional notion of an ‘ideal woman’ too highlights that an ‘ideal’ woman is someone who is gentle, demure, soft and most importantly, silent while a woman who speaks her mind especially in public is branded talkative. The gender expectations thereby have led to dystopic situations for women. “The problem with gender”, as pointed out by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) is that, “it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn’t have the weight of gender expectations” (p.34). Dystopian narratives as pointed out by Moylan (2007) “negotiate the clash of the official narrative and the oppositional counter-narrative and eventually is realised in a utopian or anti-utopian stance within its own healthy negativity” (p.152). Feminist dystopian narratives highlight not only the official narrative, but in its counter-narrative response and plot presents the resistive and rebellious streak too.

Feminist dystopias emanate from contemporary scenes. Although feminist dystopias forayed into the world of western literary scene way back, in India however, the genre of feminist dystopias have become increasingly popular of late. Homegrown feminist dystopian texts project the concerns plaguing India especially related to gender inequalities, skewed sex ratio, female foeticide, rising crimes against women and so on. The following section will analyze Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Escape* (2008) to highlight the values of feminist dystopian narrative and concerns.

Manjula Padmanabhan is not new to the world of dystopia. Her dystopian play *Harvest* (1997) based on organ trafficking won the Onassis Prize in 1997. Padmanabhan’s novel *Escape* is equally dystopian in its approach as it is set in a future India where all the women population has been annihilated. The only survivor is a young girl, Meiji, who has been kept in secret



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by her three uncles, Eldest, Middle and Youngest. It is later decided that she will be sent away with her Youngest uncle, in search of a safe haven where it will not be a crime to be a woman. Thus, begins Meiji's journey to safety and how during the course of this journey she discovers her 'self' and identity thereby leading to the awakening of female consciousness.

The dystopian totalitarian regime of *Escape* is ruled by a group of clones called 'Generals', who all are connected mentally due to their jaw implants. Thus, they share the same neural activity. The women are referred to as the 'vermin tribe' by the Generals and they have been systematically erased from the society as well as from public records too. Women, now exist only in the memory of select few and their tales are passed down from the older generation males to the younger generation males. Thus, a sense of curiosity and myth exists amongst the men who have never encountered the presence of any female in the dystopian landscape of *Escape*.

Meiji's predicament is highly significant in the novel because it is not just her tale of survival but it is also about her identity and her 'self'. Meiji's uncles raise her in a 'no-woman' world, give her depressants to delay her puberty, and she is not even aware that she is a girl. In this world of men, her fate is sealed by the decisions taken by men (her uncles). The denial of her true identity, the fact that her body was denied its natural growth on account of the depressants indeed presents a dystopian picture. This dystopian predicament is aptly highlighted by the desolate surroundings filled with radioactive waste during Meiji's journey across the plains:

The world had become a flat disk with her alone at the centre. Even as she caught sight of the camel, the cart and her uncle, directly east of her position with her shadow pointing like a finger towards them, fear bit down upon her with steel fangs.

It was not possible, she realised, to own this kind of formless space, with no walls or ceiling to define it. It could never be befriended or tamed. In every direction, the alien endlessness engulfed and annihilated her. ... Even her shadow, that kindly, familiar companion that had danced with her upon the walls of her room, allowing her to fashion it into antlered deer and knob-nosed swans, had here become a monstrous giant. (Padmanabhan, 2008, p. 110)

Technology has also been nefariously used by the Generals to maintain and perpetuate their hegemony. Citizens are constantly monitored and put under surveillance:

'Dynamic Surveillance teams operate all over the City. Don't you have them in the Interior? Well, I suppose your average density is too low to justify the expense.'

The orb was a vehicle equipped to climb up the sides of buildings like a giant spider, prying at will into the lives of residents. Each one had two Boyz inside, patrolling the city day and night, looking for law breakers and potential dissidents, taking pictures and recording conversations. 'In the early days they caught at least ten offenders every day,' said Budget. 'But two years after the machines were brought it, convictions plunged. And now?' He paused triumphantly. 'Down to nil. An amazing achievement.'

...In the beginning it was smuggling and gender crimes but nowadays it's only smuggling and that too nothing regular.' (Padmanabhan, 2008, p. 351)

The world of *Escape* envisions a world without women, the vulnerability and predicament of a girl survivor, and the dangerous usage of technology. Many of India's social problems are critiqued and highlighted in the novel. India's declining female population is a dangerous trend and Padmanabhan's dystopian text compels us to envision a world without women thereby serving as a cautionary tale by highlighting speculative scenarios that is so vital and intrinsic to a feminist dystopian narrative. Feminist dystopias thereby are highly significant to "draw attention to the fragility and newness of women's voices, to keep us from taking our freedom to speak for granted, to urge the need for continuing the fight, and to highlight



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the courage and beauty of those who break silences” (Jones, 1991, p.11). And, this is essentially what Meiji does towards the end- she speaks up and takes control of her body thereby highlighting the core value of feminist dystopias:

‘Yesterday I pushed my fingers inside –’

‘What?’

‘You told me not to do it, but I did. I pushed my fingers in. And there was nothing in there.’

[...]

‘Yes. I used a mirror, so that I could see what I was doing. It looked yucky. Just like in the pictures.’

‘Will you promise me you won’t do it again?’

[...]

‘No,’ said Meiji. ‘I won’t promise. It’s my body. I want to understand –’. (Padmanabhan, 2008, pp. 328–329)

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