

ENVISIONING ALTERNATIVE WORLDS: FEMINIST FUTURITY, GENDER POLITICS, AND SOCIAL REIMAGINATION IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *ESCAPE* AND *THE ISLAND OF LOST GIRLS*

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Abstract:

Gender-based violence remains one of the most pervasive manifestations of patriarchal power, shaping social structures, bodily autonomy, and the lived experiences of women across cultures. Contemporary feminist science fiction responds to these realities by imagining alternative worlds that expose, critique, and challenge systems of gendered oppression. Situated within this framework, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) employ speculative and dystopian settings to interrogate the consequences of misogyny, female infanticide, reproductive control, and the commodification of women's bodies. Through their imaginative engagement with future societies, these novels reveal how gendered violence is embedded within political, technological, and social institutions.

This paper examines how Padmanabhan constructs alternative worlds not merely as dystopian warnings but as critical spaces for feminist resistance and social reimagination. Drawing upon feminist science fiction criticism and feminist dystopian theory, the study argues that the novels transform speculative futures into sites where dominant patriarchal narratives are contested, and alternative possibilities are envisioned. In *Escape*, the near-erasure of women from society foregrounds the devastating consequences of systemic gender violence, while *The Island of Lost Girls* explores the ethical and social implications of technological interventions in reproduction and identity formation. By foregrounding female agency, survival, and resistance, both texts challenge gender hierarchies and imagine more equitable social arrangements.

The paper further contends that Padmanabhan's speculative narratives contribute to contemporary debates on gender justice by demonstrating how science fiction can function as a mode of social critique and feminist intervention. Thus, the novels highlight the structural nature of gendered violence while simultaneously envisioning transformative futures beyond patriarchal constraints.

Keywords: Envisioning, alternative realities, dystopian realities, gendered violence.

Introduction

Science fiction has increasingly become an important literary mode for examining social inequalities and imagining alternative futures. Unlike traditional realist narratives, science fiction allows writers to project contemporary anxieties into speculative worlds, thereby exposing structures of power that often remain naturalized within everyday life. Feminist science fiction, in particular, has employed speculative imagination to interrogate gender hierarchies, patriarchal institutions, and the unequal distribution of power. Through imagined futures, feminist writers challenge existing social arrangements and envision possibilities for more equitable worlds.

Indian science fiction has witnessed significant growth in recent decades, with writers increasingly

utilizing speculative narratives to engage with questions of technology, identity, environment, and social justice. Among contemporary Indian science fiction writers, Manjula Padmanabhan occupies a distinctive position due to her sustained engagement with gender politics and technological futures. Her novels *Escape* (2008) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) explore dystopian societies in which patriarchal violence and technological interventions reshape human relationships and social structures. Although the novels are set in imagined futures, they remain deeply connected to contemporary concerns regarding female infanticide, gender discrimination, reproductive control, and the commodification of women's bodies.

The significance of Padmanabhan's work lies in her ability to transform speculative fiction into a powerful critique of gendered violence. Rather than presenting dystopian futures as distant possibilities, she reveals how such futures emerge from existing social practices and ideological structures. The speculative worlds depicted in the novels exaggerate present inequalities, enabling readers to recognize the systemic nature of gender-based oppression. At the same time, these narratives do not merely offer pessimistic visions. They also foreground female resilience, agency, and resistance, thereby opening possibilities for social transformation.

This paper examines how *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* employ feminist dystopian strategies to expose the consequences of patriarchal domination while imagining alternative futures beyond gender oppression. Drawing upon feminist science fiction criticism, feminist dystopian theory, and posthumanist perspectives, the study investigates the ways in which gendered violence is embedded within political, technological, and social institutions. It argues that Padmanabhan's novels function simultaneously as warnings against patriarchal excesses and as imaginative spaces for feminist reimagination.

Literature Review:

Recent scholarship on Manjula Padmanabhan's speculative fiction has expanded significantly. Simran Mittal's study examines Meiji's transformation through posthumanist frameworks, emphasizing non-human alliances and fluid identities. Argha Basu and Priyanka Tripathi investigate the destabilization of biological definitions of womanhood and the epistemological implications of gender fluidity in the two novels. More recently, Shraddha Jha and Amrita Satapathy analyse the novels through the lens of femicide and posthuman resistance, arguing that Padmanabhan exposes the processes through which patriarchal societies produce "wasted lives." Other studies have explored ecofeminist dimensions in *Escape* and the intersection between environmental degradation and gender oppression.

While these studies provide valuable insights, comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how Padmanabhan's dystopian futures simultaneously operate as critiques of gendered violence and as spaces of feminist futurity. Existing scholarship often focuses on either posthuman identity, reproductive politics, or ecological concerns. This paper addresses that gap by examining how *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* transform dystopian narratives into sites of social reimagination where female agency challenges patriarchal structures and imagines alternative possibilities for collective existence.

Feminist science fiction has long functioned as a critical mode through which patriarchal structures are interrogated and alternative social arrangements imagined. Scholars such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Francesca Ferrando have emphasized that speculative narratives provide productive frameworks for questioning dominant constructions of gender, embodiment, and identity. Within contemporary feminist dystopian studies, scholars have increasingly focused on how speculative fiction exposes the systemic nature of gendered violence while simultaneously envisioning possibilities of resistance and transformation.

Recent scholarship on feminist dystopia has highlighted the growing importance of non-Western speculative narratives. Some studies suggest that feminist dystopian fiction from the Global South challenges universal views of patriarchy by highlighting local histories, cultural practices, and technological inequalities. Research on Indian speculative fiction demonstrates that dystopian narratives often intersect with concerns surrounding caste, gender discrimination, reproductive control, and state power.

Within this context, Padmanabhan's fiction has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Mittal's work on Meiji's journey from marginalization to posthuman subjectivity argues that the protagonist's alliances with human and non-human entities challenge rigid gender binaries and open possibilities for alternative modes of existence. Basu and Tripathi similarly contend that Padmanabhan destabilizes conventional understandings of womanhood by interrogating biological determinism and reproductive essentialism.

The issue of femicide has become central to recent interpretations of the novels. Jha and Satapathy argue that *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* depict the systematic production of women's expendability within patriarchal modernity. They demonstrate how the narratives expose the social mechanisms through which women are categorized as disposable and rendered vulnerable to elimination. Their analysis highlights the significance of posthuman resistance as a means of challenging oppressive structures.

Ecofeminist approaches have also contributed to understanding Padmanabhan's work. Binani and Singh argue that *Escape* links environmental destruction and patriarchal domination, suggesting that ecological degradation and gender oppression emerge from similar ideological structures. Such readings emphasize the interconnected nature of social and environmental justice within feminist dystopian narratives.

However, despite these important contributions, there remains a need for a more comprehensive examination of how Padmanabhan's novels mobilize dystopian futures as spaces of feminist reimagination. This study contributes to existing scholarship by bringing together feminist dystopian theory, feminist futurity, and social critique to demonstrate how the novels move beyond exposing violence toward envisioning transformative futures.

Feminist Futurity, Dystopia, and Posthuman Resistance

This study draws upon three interconnected theoretical perspectives: feminist dystopian theory, feminist futurity, and critical posthumanism. Feminist dystopian theory examines how speculative futures expose structures of gender oppression while retaining possibilities for resistance. Raffaella Baccolini argues that feminist dystopias differ from classical dystopias because they preserve spaces for political agency and transformative action.

The concept of feminist futurity provides an additional framework for understanding how marginalized subjects imagine alternative futures beyond oppressive social arrangements. Feminist futurity rejects deterministic visions of the future and instead emphasizes collective possibilities for social transformation. Within this framework, speculative fiction functions not merely as prediction but as political imagination.

Critical posthumanism, particularly as articulated by Braidotti and Ferrando, challenges anthropocentric and essentialist notions of identity. Recent studies on Padmanabhan's novels demonstrate how posthuman perspectives illuminate alternative forms of embodiment and relationality that transcend patriarchal binaries. Combining these approaches enables a nuanced understanding of how the novels critique gendered violence while imagining new forms of social existence.

Technology, Biopolitics, and the Governance of Female Bodies

One aspect that deserves greater emphasis is the relationship between technology and biopolitics. Both novels reveal how technological systems become instruments for regulating female bodies and reproductive capacities. In *Escape*, technological surveillance reinforces patriarchal control, while in *The Island of Lost Girls*, reproductive technologies facilitate new forms of bodily commodification.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, it becomes evident that the management of reproduction serves as a central mechanism through which authority is exercised. Female bodies become sites upon which political power is inscribed and enforced. Rather than liberating individuals, technological advancement frequently intensifies systems of control when embedded within patriarchal structures.

Yet Padmanabhan resists technological determinism. The novels do not suggest that technology itself is inherently oppressive. Instead, they reveal that technologies reflect the ideological values of the societies that produce them. Consequently, meaningful social transformation requires not only technological innovation

but also ethical and political change. This insight remains particularly relevant in contemporary debates concerning artificial intelligence, reproductive technologies, and digital surveillance.

Feminist Science Fiction and Feminist Dystopian Theory

Feminist science fiction emerged as an important literary tradition during the twentieth century as writers sought to challenge male-dominated representations of science, technology, and society. Scholars such as Marleen S. Barr, Sarah Lefanu, and Donna Haraway have emphasized that feminist science fiction provides a critical framework through which dominant assumptions regarding gender can be questioned and reconfigured. By imagining alternative social arrangements, feminist science fiction creates opportunities to rethink established norms and explore new possibilities for human existence.

Darko Suvin's concept of "cognitive estrangement" remains central to understanding the political significance of science fiction. According to Suvin, science fiction enables readers to perceive their own social realities from a critical distance. Through estrangement, familiar social structures appear unfamiliar, making their ideological foundations visible. In feminist science fiction, this estrangement often exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchal power operates. By presenting exaggerated or alternative gender systems, feminist writers encourage readers to critically evaluate existing inequalities.

Feminist dystopian fiction represents a particularly significant branch of feminist science fiction. While traditional dystopian narratives often focus on authoritarian governments and political oppression, feminist dystopias foreground issues related to gender, sexuality, reproduction, and bodily autonomy. Raffaella Baccolini argues that feminist dystopias differ from conventional dystopian narratives because they retain possibilities for resistance and transformation. Rather than depicting entirely hopeless worlds, they create spaces where marginalized subjects challenge oppressive systems.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* remains one of the most influential examples of feminist dystopian fiction. Atwood demonstrates how reproductive control becomes a mechanism through which patriarchal states regulate women's bodies and identities. Similar concerns appear in Padmanabhan's fiction, where female bodies become sites of political control, technological intervention, and economic exploitation. However, Padmanabhan's narratives are situated within specifically Indian social contexts, reflecting concerns regarding female infanticide, gender imbalance, and patriarchal cultural practices.

Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg further enriches feminist analyses of technology and identity. Haraway challenges essentialist understandings of gender by emphasizing the fluidity of boundaries between human and machine. Her work encourages critical reflection on how technological developments reshape identities and social relations. In Padmanabhan's novels, technological interventions significantly influence gender relations, raising questions regarding autonomy, embodiment, and the future of humanity itself.

Gendered Violence and Patriarchal Dystopia in *Escape*

Published in 2008, *Escape* presents a chilling vision of a future society in which women have been almost entirely eliminated. The novel imagines a world where female infanticide has become so widespread that women have virtually disappeared from public life. This speculative scenario extends contemporary concerns regarding gender-selective practices to their logical extreme, revealing the devastating consequences of patriarchal violence.

At the center of the narrative is Meiji, a young girl believed to be the last surviving female in a society governed by authoritarian patriarchy. Her existence represents both vulnerability and resistance. Because women have become rare commodities, Meiji is relentlessly pursued by powerful men who seek to possess and control her. The treatment of Meiji illustrates how patriarchal systems reduce women to objects rather than recognizing them as autonomous individuals.

The society depicted in *Escape* is organized around the systematic exclusion of women. Patriarchal authority extends into every aspect of social life, including governance, family structures, and personal relationships. Women are not merely marginalized; they are erased. This erasure reflects the culmination of

deeply entrenched misogynistic practices that already exist within contemporary societies. By projecting these tendencies into the future, Padmanabhan exposes the structural nature of gendered violence.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the novel is its representation of female scarcity as a source of social crisis. Rather than encouraging respect for women, scarcity intensifies male competition and possessiveness. Women become valuable commodities precisely because they are rare. Such commodification reveals how patriarchal cultures often perceive women primarily through their reproductive and sexual functions.

The novel also highlights the relationship between violence and surveillance. Meiji's movements are constantly monitored by technological systems and male authorities. Surveillance becomes a mechanism for enforcing patriarchal control and restricting female autonomy. Through this portrayal, Padmanabhan demonstrates how technological advancement does not necessarily lead to social progress. Instead, technology can reinforce existing inequalities when controlled by oppressive institutions.

Despite these conditions, *Escape* remains a narrative of resistance. Meiji's survival challenges the ideological foundations of patriarchal society. Her refusal to submit entirely to male control transforms her into a symbol of hope and possibility. Similarly, the characters who assist her escape represent alternative forms of social organization based on care, solidarity, and ethical responsibility.

The title itself carries significant symbolic meaning. *Escape* is not merely a physical act but also an intellectual and political process. It signifies liberation from oppressive structures and the possibility of imagining different futures. Through Meiji's journey, Padmanabhan suggests that resistance begins with the refusal to accept patriarchal violence as inevitable.

Reproductive Technologies and Bodily Commodification in *The Island of Lost Girls*

While *Escape* focuses on the consequences of female erasure, *The Island of Lost Girls* examines the implications of technological interventions in reproduction and identity. The novel explores a future where scientific advancements have transformed traditional understandings of family, gender, and human relationships.

Central to the narrative is the question of who controls reproductive technologies and for what purposes. Padmanabhan demonstrates that technological innovation is never politically neutral. Instead, technologies operate within broader social structures that shape their development and application. When patriarchal values influence technological systems, scientific progress may reinforce rather than challenge existing inequalities.

The novel portrays female bodies as sites of technological experimentation and economic exploitation. Reproduction becomes detached from emotional and social relationships, transforming human life into a commodity that can be produced, managed, and controlled. Such developments raise profound ethical questions regarding autonomy, consent, and human dignity.

The commodification of women's bodies in the novel reflects contemporary concerns regarding reproductive technologies, surrogacy industries, and biomedical markets. By projecting these issues into speculative futures, Padmanabhan encourages readers to critically examine present-day practices. The dystopian setting reveals how market forces and technological ambitions can intersect with patriarchal ideologies to produce new forms of oppression.

At the same time, the novel complicates simplistic oppositions between technology and humanity. Technology itself is not inherently oppressive. Rather, the ethical implications of technological developments depend upon the social values guiding their use. Padmanabhan therefore avoids technological determinism, focusing instead on the political structures that shape scientific innovation.

The island functions symbolically as a liminal space where dominant social norms can be questioned and reconfigured. Isolated from conventional society, it becomes a site for exploring alternative possibilities of identity and community. The "lost girls" of the title represent individuals marginalized by existing systems

yet capable of imagining different futures.

Female agency remains central to the narrative. Although the characters face significant constraints, they continue to negotiate, resist, and challenge the forces seeking to define them. Their actions underscore the importance of autonomy and collective solidarity in confronting systems of domination.

Feminist Futurity and Social Reimagination

A defining feature of Padmanabhan's fiction is its emphasis on futurity. Feminist futurity refers to the capacity of speculative narratives to imagine futures beyond existing structures of oppression. Rather than accepting patriarchal systems as permanent, feminist futurity opens possibilities for transformation and change.

Both *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* demonstrate that alternative futures emerge through acts of resistance. The protagonists challenge dominant ideologies by asserting their agency and refusing imposed identities. Their struggles reveal that social transformation requires both individual courage and collective action.

The novels also critique assumptions that technological progress automatically produces social progress. Scientific advancements alone cannot eliminate inequalities if underlying power structures remain unchanged. Padmanabhan repeatedly emphasizes that ethical and social transformation must accompany technological development.

Importantly, the alternative worlds depicted in the novels function as critical mirrors reflecting contemporary realities. Female infanticide, gender discrimination, reproductive exploitation, and bodily commodification are not merely futuristic concerns; they are ongoing social issues. By exaggerating these conditions within speculative settings, Padmanabhan encourages readers to recognize their structural dimensions.

The novels further highlight the interconnectedness of gender, power, and technology. Patriarchal violence operates not only through physical coercion but also through institutional mechanisms, technological systems, and cultural ideologies. Consequently, meaningful social change requires challenging multiple forms of domination simultaneously.

Through their imaginative engagement with future societies, the novels create spaces for envisioning more equitable social arrangements. These visions do not offer simplistic utopian solutions. Instead, they acknowledge the complexities of social transformation while maintaining faith in the possibility of change.

Conclusion

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* represent significant contributions to contemporary feminist science fiction. Through speculative and dystopian narratives, the novels expose the structural nature of gendered violence and reveal how patriarchal power operates through social, political, and technological institutions. By projecting contemporary anxieties into imagined futures, Padmanabhan encourages critical reflection on issues such as female infanticide, reproductive control, surveillance, and bodily commodification.

Drawing upon feminist dystopian strategies, the novels transform speculative futures into sites of resistance and social critique. Although the worlds they depict are marked by violence and oppression, they also contain possibilities for agency, solidarity, and transformation. Female characters emerge not merely as victims but as active participants in the struggle against patriarchal domination.

Ultimately, Padmanabhan's fiction demonstrates the enduring relevance of feminist science fiction as a mode of social intervention. Her novels challenge readers to confront the consequences of gender inequality while imagining alternative futures grounded in justice, autonomy, and human dignity. In doing so, they contribute meaningfully to contemporary debates regarding gender politics, technological ethics, and social transformation.

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