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**Manjula Padmanabhan's Escape: A study of the dystopian futuristic vision through science fiction**

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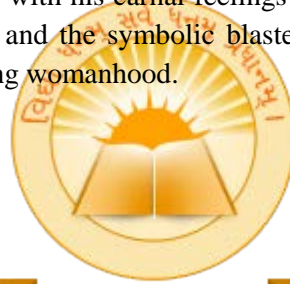
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Keywords: Dystopian vision , Misogynist dictatorship , Scientific aggression , Drain clearing,  
Cloning technology

### Abstract

Escape articulates Manjula Padmanabhan's concerns over insane scientific aggression and fast receding humanism. It portrays a country governed by the misogynist dictatorship of Generals, set in the futuristic world inhabited by Clones , Drones and Boyz, all a figment of science fiction. The two protagonists of the novel are escaping from the country which has close resemblance to India though it is never mentioned. In this country women are extinct under a two-decade programme eliminating natural procreation in favour of a cloning technology that gives complete control to a dictatorship of Generals. Meiji is the last surviving female in a country that has wiped out the fairer sex as they have invented the cloning technology annihilating the need for natural procreation altogether. She has been kept hidden by her Uncles but after some time keeping her hidden becomes difficult for her Uncles and they decide to move her to a safer destination .Uncle Youngest is entrusted with the responsibility of taking her to her freedom. The entire plot is built around this Journey. This journey has a symbolic meaning for both the Protagonists. For Meiji it is a journey to Womanhood and for Youngest it is a struggle with his carnal feelings and propriety. Underlying the grotesque sci-fi genre characters like drones, Generals, boyz and the symbolic blasted landscape painted in dystopian terms is the effervescent lust for life and dreams of attaining womanhood.



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### **Manjula Padmanabhan's Escape: a study of the dystopian futuristic vision through science fiction**

Escape by Manjula Padmanabhan is a curious amalgamation of picaresque genre and science fiction with a generous sprinkling of feministic ideology, all of them finely spun together and kept alive by gently flowing narrative and characterization with unflinching candor and objectivity. It works on many levels : as a solid adventure yarn, a well realized work of speculative fiction and a sensitive character study. The story is set in a "No women's land" which is entirely cut-off from the rest of the planet and governed by the power obsessed generals who are clone brothers to each other. In this artificially sculpted world, a coup by clone technology wielding misogynist generals has eliminated the "need" for women, since they see women primarily as 'breeders' and weak breeders at that, who cannot compete with the perfection of clone technology. In this country women are extinct under a two decade programme eliminating natural procreation in favour of clone technology thus giving complete control to a dictatorship of generals. Here the author is hinting towards the fact that women are tolerated in our society because of their utility as a tool for reproduction. Once their utility is done away with due to advances in science and technology, male chauvinist ideologues will not think twice before annihilating women from the face of this earth.

The sole survivor in this dystopian vision is a young girl named Meiji, who has been clandestinely raised on an estate by her three uncles, called Eldest, Middle and Youngest. Meiji along with her three uncles lives in an unnamed country where nobody has any identity or name is symbolic of the death of individuality in this imperfect and incomplete world. Although Manjula Padmanabhan avers that "the names in this novel do not reveal the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the characters. They aren't culture-neutral? They are purged of community, religion and context." It seems that this has been done deliberately to fit them into the sci-fi genre. For Meiji's uncles "it is a unique privilege merely to breathe the same air as her"(3) but now they realize that it is the time for their "unique and irreplaceable jewel"(15) to leave them as a chance of survival rest with her being transported to a safe world. Meiji has survived in secret, brought up by her uncles, but now, as she approaches puberty, her sex and sexuality is a threat as much to herself as to her protectors. Our religious literature is a replete with such instances where women and her sexuality is referred to as the door of hell. Though sending her away for them as described by Eldest is "as ripping my still-beating heart from my chest and eating it"(30).

Youngest is handed over the uphill task of escorting her to the safer boundaries and to make his "Squirrel" as he fondly calls her, feel safe and secure in his company. Meiji has always been close to her Youngest uncle, for he is the one who plays with her and answers her every query about the weird world they live in. Youngest is aware of the danger that he may have to face on the way, the boyz of generals who can blast out any one at slightest provocation and the misogynist philosophy of the generals towards women referred to as the "vermin tribe". Along the way youngest has to execute the difficult task of maintaining Meiji's disguise as young boy, guard her from the inquisitive people and the most significant one help her understand her own identity and deal with her experiences that she has



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never gone through or imagined. So they carry on their journey, skirting radioactive waste land and unthinking warriors, speed boating down rivers to a safer world where Meiji can be accepted as a natural. During this journey they discover certain truths about themselves, about the nature of desire and relationship. What is remarkable is that the two journeys are conducted simultaneously ?, both at the subterranean and the external level and it is the canny juxtaposition of the two that lends brilliance to the work. The entire plot is built around the journey and tries to capture the tender stirrings of the twilight zone both in the case of Meiji and the youngest. In Meiji's case the twilight zone is that of turbulent adolescence where remnants of innocence and desire of experience struggle to win supremacy over each other. Moreover she must also understand what a woman is, in the absence of any other living specimens to guide or even assure her that to be a woman is to be normal. She is shocked when told about her stunted growth and comes dangerously close to self loathing on realizing that she is the last of a tribe that has been exterminated. Whereas in case of the Youngest, the twilight zone comprises of morality - the desire for Meiji as a woman and the call of his conscience impelling him to deliver the helpless little protégé to the safety zone.

Youngest's struggles with his internal conflict and predicament as how to deal with Meiji's self-revelation and his own concealed desires put him in a position where he is ruthless to his Squirrel. "It's a survival tactic, that's all. We've both got to become diamond hard or we'll be ground down and snuffed out" (188). He is also surprised with the unfathomable changes in her attitude, earlier he "had always known what she was thinking, even words and expressions came as a delightful revelation" (207), now she argues with him and hates him. By the end of the journey, sympathetic companions become distanced from each other. Meiji is shocked with the changes in her body, as she becomes conscious of her body. The anatomical change in her body scares her she thinks she has become a monster. It hurts her when she sees men dressed as women while she is disguising herself as a boy; she calls herself as talking drone created by her uncles for pleasure. It is agonizing for Youngest when Swan violates Meiji's body; he blames himself for her ordeal, for plucking a child out of her innocence. He remembers his comfortable Estate apartment, the feel of satin and silk against his skin and the luxuries of a bath but he is ready to bear all for Meiji's survival. Meiji's transformation to a woman brings back Youngest's memories of his mother, sisters and their tragic end. He also remembers Meiji's mother and his association with her and how they created Meiji, it is a shock for Meiji when she comes to know that Youngest is her father.

In an interview taken by woman reporter, when the general is asked about the term he would use for annihilating two third of the population, he calls it "Drain - clearing"(146) though the people of his barren land crave for a female company. When Youngest admits his desire for Meiji, but he is ashamed of it "what am I - what beast, what filth - to feel this way"(37), Eldest advises him to "discover the limits of his own endurance". When Windseeker meets them he identifies a scent that he has not encountered in many years, a smell that he had not expected to smell again in his lifetime. Manjula Padmanabhan is one of the Indian writers who need to be read as much for what she leaves unsaid as for what she does say. An interplay of the writer's candour and reader's imagination produces amazing results in



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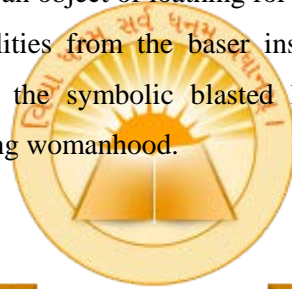
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Manjula Padmanabhan's plays and stories. Her semblance to Hemingway's art of suppression makes her one of the most distinguished writers of Indian English literature. Her art has also been compared to other international authors as well. Comparing *Escape* to Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaids' Tale" and P.D.James's "Children of Men" , Padmanabhan says "Escape has a different energy, entirely because both the books belong to a much more genteel world where women are not being murdered in the western society, as they are in present day India, both as dowry murders and as unborns and just borns".

Manjula Padmanabhan writes with "in your face" attitude without in the least giving an impression of trying to shock the readers. She creates disturbing, morally complex, even cringe inducing scenes with aplomb. Some passages stand out for their unsentimental exploration of sexuality without passing any moral judgment. Here the passage in question is the one where the two of them are bathing together and though the Youngest's feelings are not explicitly spelled out by the reader, there is a hint that he has been taken over by the carnal instinct which brings forth discomfort for both him and the reader. But this act of moral impropriety (by our conventional notions of propriety - because of his status as her blood relative and guardian) seems pardonable because we acknowledge humaneness in his stirrings which see her as a human being, an equal, rather than as an object of loathing for others like the general. We are reminded that it isn't easy to extricate our finer human qualities from the baser instincts. Underlying the grotesque sci-fi genre characters like drones, Generals, boyz and the symbolic blasted landscape painted in dystopian terms is the effervescent lust for life and dreams of attaining womanhood.



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