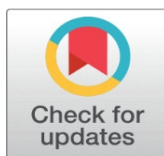
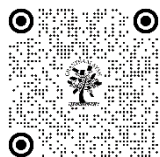


SOCIAL ECOFEMINISM IN ESCAPE BY MANJULA PADMANABHAN

Mansi Binani ¹✉, Dr. Swati Singh ²

¹PhD Scholar, GD Goenka University, Sohna, Haryana

²Assistant Professor, GD Goenka University, Sohna, Haryana



Corresponding Author

Mansi Binani,
binani.mansi@gmail.com

DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.1871](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.1871)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

The present study highlights the themes of ecofeminism and dystopia in Manjula Padmanabhan's novel *Escape*. The primary goal is to analyse how the novel portrays a society that systematically oppresses women and exploits the environment, reflecting broader concerns of patriarchal control and ecological degradation. The research design includes a critical examination of the narrative structure and thematic elements, drawing from ecofeminist theory to explore the interconnectedness of gender and environmental issues. The methodology involves a close reading of the text, with a focus on character dynamics, particularly the experiences of women in the dystopian setting. The analysis reveals that Padmanabhan's depiction of a world where women are hunted and nature is ravaged serves as a powerful critique of contemporary societal norms. To conclude that *Escape* not only highlights the dangers of extreme patriarchal dominance but also advocates for a reconceptualization of human relationships with nature and each other, emphasizing the need for ecological and gender justice.

Keywords: Social Ecofeminism, Gender Oppression, Environmental Degradation, Dystopian Fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism, as a theoretical and activist movement, emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the dual exploitation of women and nature under patriarchal systems. Rooted in the belief that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are intrinsically linked, ecofeminism seeks to challenge the hierarchical structures that perpetuate this dual oppression. It draws connections between the ways in which patriarchal societies have historically marginalized women, often aligning them with nature to justify their subjugation, and the systematic exploitation of the natural world. In the context of Indian literature, ecofeminism takes on additional layers of complexity, as it must also contend with the legacies of colonialism, caste, and class, which further complicate the relationships between gender, nature, and power.

Indian ecofeminism, in particular, is shaped by the country's diverse cultural, religious, and ecological landscapes, deeply influenced by the historical and contemporary struggles of women, particularly those from rural and indigenous

communities, who have often been at the forefront of environmental activism. These women, whose lives are intricately tied to the land, have resisted the encroachment of modern industrialization and the commodification of natural resources, asserting their rights to both their bodies and their environments. The Chipko Movement, for instance, where rural women in the Himalayan region embraced trees to prevent deforestation, exemplifies this deep connection between women and nature. Similarly, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, led by Adivasi women, highlights how environmental activism in India often intersects with the fight for the rights of marginalized communities.

Indian ecofeminism, therefore, not only critiques the patriarchal and capitalist exploitation of nature but also emphasizes the importance of cultural and spiritual connections to the land. This movement is not merely a resistance against environmental degradation but also a preservation of cultural identities and livelihoods. Manjula Padmanabhan's work reflects these themes, offering a narrative that is both deeply rooted in Indian cultural contexts and engaged with global ecofeminist discourses, illustrating how literary works can capture the unique intersections of gender, environment, and culture in the Indian context.

2. SOCIAL ECOFEMINISM

It is a branch of ecofeminism, posits that the exploitation of nature is intrinsically linked to the oppression of women, both of which stem from the broader social hierarchies of power and domination. Unlike other forms of ecofeminism that focus on the symbolic or spiritual connections between women and nature, social ecofeminism emphasizes the material and social conditions that lead to the subjugation of both. It argues that the domination of nature is a direct consequence of the domination of humans by other humans, primarily through patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures. This chapter explores the theme of social ecofeminism as it manifests in *Escape*, analysing how Padmanabhan intertwines ecological and feminist concerns to critique the oppressive structures of a patriarchal society.

Manjula Padmanabhan is an Indian cartoonist, playwright, fiction writer, journalist and children's author whose work profoundly engages with themes of gender, technology, and environmentalism. She often uses dystopian settings to discuss issues of the present. She has "boldly stepped out of conventions that define respectability to address issues of gender, woman, her body and its behaviour, its exploitation in a family and social setting..... Manjula Padmanabhan has opened a fresh dialogue on a new angle of feminist concerns" (qtd. in Joseph).

Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopian novel *Escape* (2008) envisages a male-dominated world bereft of any morals and ethics. The story is set in a country devoid of women, which is entirely cut-off from the rest of the world and governed by the power-obsessed generals who are clone brothers to each other. This dystopian tale touches upon the issue of the alarming decline in the sex ratio of an imaginary civilization where women are no longer needed for reproduction since men can clone themselves whenever they wish. *Escape* is the story of Meiji, who is the last surviving female in a country where women are extinct because the Generals have invented the cloning technology, thus annihilating the need for natural procreation altogether. The land is ruled by the General and his clone brothers who are "all continuously radio linked in some way, something about, oh...sub-retinal microchips... embedded within their eyes" (Padmanabhan 31). Meiji has been kept hidden in an estate by her three Uncles called Eldest, Middle and Youngest; but after some time, hiding her becomes difficult for her uncles and they entrust Youngest with the responsibility of escorting her to a safer place. Along the way, Youngest has to ensure that Meiji maintains her disguise as a young boy, in order to guard her from General's "permanent guard of three hundred young men, known familiarly as 'the Boyz'" (39). The two protagonists of the novel carry on their journey amongst the radioactive wasteland, "through a region so toxic that birds used to fall out of the air, dead" (119), to a safer world where Meiji can be accepted as a natural. During this journey, Meiji discovers her own identity and deals with experiences that she has never gone through or imagined.

Escape is amongst one of the few Indian science fiction novels that has "a room for plurality and multiplicity to provide the reader not only with entertainment but with tools to debate on post-humanism, environmentalism, gender, class and religion, among others" (qtd. in Panda & Bhattacharya 86). This paper aims to highlight the phenomenon of social ecofeminism which is present in this novel. As a theory, social ecofeminism accepts the basic tenet of social ecology that the idea of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human. Only ending all systems of domination makes possible an ecological society, in which no states or capitalist economies attempt to subjugate nature, in which all

aspects of human nature-including sexuality and the passions as well as rationality-are freed. (qtd. in Panda & Bhattacharya 89)

3. GENDER AND ECOLOGY

In this novel, Padmanabhan very subtly brings social subject like female foeticide and the significant decline in sex ratio to the readers' attention. The novel also focuses on the inevitable disruption of the ecological equilibrium of this world. Rupali Palodkar, in her article "Ecofeminism in India: Disappearing Daughters in Padmanabhan's *Escape*," highlights the social ecofeminist concern surveyed by Manjula Padmanabhan in her novel:

In Indian society, the ownership of women's body and sexuality and that of land (nature) has continued to rest with men since ancient times. Of all places in the world, it is in India that sex-selective abortions are practiced on a wide-scale. There is a need to find an alternative to men's exploitation of the earth and to discover an ecologically sound way of life that would not threaten the existence either of the earth or of women. That is why women writers like Manjula Padmanabhan are turning to ecofeminist thinking and is writing about the consequences of degradation of nature and woman. (qtd. in Panda & Bhattacharya 90)

Until women are freed from patriarchal authority and Nature is freed from industrial and social assault, the idea of an equal society would remain a meaningless rhetoric. Through her novel, *Escape*, Manjula Padmanabhan emphasizes the need for self-awakening of both women and nature, who desperately need to resist the oppression exercised by the patriarchal, autocratic regime.

4. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS

Escape also explores the socio-cultural, radical, mental, emotional, and other aspects related to the imbalance in the sex ratio. The novel investigates the consequences of the fast-declining sex ratio in India resulting from a strong gender bias against women. In the novel, The General talks of how convenient the environment was to carry forward a practice that is already in existence:

They never accepted our views regarding the elimination of females even though they had been practicing various forms of elimination in the years leading up to the Change. The existing deficit of vermin... in our world enormously aided our task. (Padmanabhan 256-257)

Through this novel, Padmanabhan "gives a strong warning about the unimaginable terrors that humanity would have to face if the violence against women is allowed to continue unabated" (Joseph 2). She presents a disturbing futuristic vision of India where over 50 million girls and women went missing due to termination of the female foetus or high mortality of the girl child due to lack of proper care.

According to the 2011 census, India's current child sex ratio is 914 females per 1000 males, which is the lowest since the 1961 census. This novel warns of the ruthless delineation of the future world that is just around the corner. The novel explores the horrifying ramifications of the extinction of females and draws a parallel to reality because the discrepancy in the sex ratio will create a disturbance in balancing the natural law of life on earth.

The novel also probes into the human psyche wherein humans become machine-like and machines replace humans. In the novel, the concept of reproducing life is now artificially reconstructed in laboratories that manufacture clones. Ecofeminist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva describe cloning, as "the ultimate expression of the commercialization of science and the commodification of nature" (Shiva 24). This technology has eliminated the need for women since the oppressive Generals see women primarily as breeders. According to the General "Female are driven by biological imperatives that lead them to compete for breeding rights. Whereas collectives breed cooperatively. In order to control breeding technology and to establish the collective ethic we had to eliminate females" (Padmanabhan 257). The amalgamation of technological advancement, as well as female subjugation, prevails throughout the novel. Clone technology replaces female reproduction; therefore, motherhood has no relevance in the Forbidden Country. The propaganda spread by the General often praises the superiority of clone technology. In his manual "*The Generals: A Plural Life*" (288), the General states: "We took the Mother out of Nature" (288). This statement fosters the belief that female

reproduction was considered to be contaminated by its very nature compared to clone technology. This perspective stems from the patriarchal view that natural reproductive processes, associated with women, are inherently flawed or impure, while clone technology, often seen as a product of male-dominated scientific advancement, is viewed as a purer, more controlled form of reproduction. This dichotomy reinforces the notion that traditional female roles and the natural processes tied to them are inferior, further entrenching the marginalization of women in society. Through this lens, ecofeminism critiques the devaluation of women's reproductive capabilities and challenges the elevation of artificial, technologically-driven alternatives as superior.

The process of cloning also eliminates individuality, as the General states, “uniqueness and individual talents belong to the past: today we can duplicate and standardize anyone, anything” (61). The plural and dehumanised voice of the Generals “erase history, geography, whole generations of people. First by removing them, then by ensuring that all reference to them is cancelled out of existence” (120). The misinformation spread by the Generals seeks to keep the citizens in ignorance, “It’s like the Generals say, *Ignorance is Power*” (263).

Padmanabhan further develops the central motif of femininity when she draws a parallel between woman and nature, introducing an ecofeminist aspect. In *Escape*, both women and nature received the same kind of treatment at the hands of the autocratic, power-hungry General. In the case of women, they need to escape from the male-dominated society and in the case of nature; it needs to be freed from the industrial and social assault. The abuse and exploitation of the natural world is being connected with the oppression and subjugation of women. In this novel, with the advancement of technology, both women and nature are being exploited. Woman is considered to have a more intimate connection with nature because of her role in giving birth and nurturing new life. Therefore, a strong parallel can be drawn between man’s attempt to colonize and enslave the female body and mind and the contemporary nation-state’s attempt to dominate and exploit Nature. The novel is set in a landscape of radioactive wasteland dominated by male-controlled industrialization, technology and science. The novel demonstrates a separation between humans and nature. This separation turns nature into the other, thereby making it more convenient for humans to exploit. In addition to this, *Escape* also expresses anthropocentric conceptualizations of nature. The “featureless wasteland” (108) in the novel is described as:

Grassy scrubland devolved into desert. Mounds of grey slag, crumbling red brick and the white crescents of broken crockery marked the sites of small towns. Nothing remained of even the slightest worth: iron cables, wood, corrugated tin sheets, shop signs, hoardings, auto spare parts, furniture- none of these remained as evidence that there were once thriving communities in this area. (102)

Imagery like this shows that the natural spaces have become unsuitable and undesirable for habitation. *Escape* presents a parallel between the futuristic vision of a radioactive wasteland and the present world of capitalist desire and advancement in science which has devalued both women and nature.

In the novel, Meiji is kept on artificial hormonal drugs which restrict her bodily growth, and this is the reason why, even at the age of sixteen, she is physically and psychologically stuck somewhere in her childhood. Her uncles made solid arrangements to guard her from the continuous surveillance of the Generals but they are still consumed by the constant threat of being exposed and punished. In this context, Padmanabhan drops a minute hint of the concept of “ecophobia” (Panda and Bhattacharya 87) through Meiji’s initial hesitation to acquaint herself with the natural world because “she had never been directly connected to such a vast space. The urge to run back indoors to safety and familiarity was turning her legs to jelly” (Padmanabhan 63). She also felt that “to stand under that crushing limitlessness was to be flattened by it, reduced to nothing” (88).

Towards the end of the novel, Meiji undergoes a profound journey of self-discovery, becoming conscious of her womanhood—a realization that had remained unexplored due to her upbringing in an all-male society. Earlier in the narrative, the anatomical changes in her body fill her with fear, leading her to believe she has “become a monster” (284). This fear reflects the deep-seated anxiety and alienation she experiences, having been conditioned in an environment that suppresses and distorts female identity. However, it is only after her alliance with the natural world around her that Meiji begins to embrace her nurturing self, unveiling aspects of her existence that had been suppressed. This connection

to nature facilitates her growth and transformation, as symbolized by the imagery of her "climbing out of this safe, underground seed case... push[ing] [her] two little green leaves up out of the soil, rais[ing her] head to the sun and—thriv[ing]" (86). This metaphorical rebirth signifies Meiji's emergence from a state of suppression to one of self-awareness and empowerment, embodying the novel's broader themes of ecofeminism and the reclamation of female identity.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* is about the pain that Meiji endures realizing her individuality, her identity as a human being, and the role nature plays in shaping and revealing that selfhood. The novel exposes the wretched situation of a female in a male-dominated world who is deprived of the liberty of self-awareness. The novel also depicts how the excessive use of nuclear power and technology contaminates the land, water as well as other natural resources. They denounced womanhood and viewed them as "The Vermin Tribe" (225). The fertile land turned barren due to excessive radioactivity. In both these cases, the reproductive capacity of women as well as nature is cast aside as unwanted elements. As a result, the land which was once the centre of fertility has turned barren and women had become completely extinct. The dystopian State in *Escape* saw both women and nature as unwanted elements and therefore they took measures to suppress and dominate them. Padmanabhan in *Escape* points a sharp finger at the social issue of female infanticide and presents a civilization on the verge of ruin due to the oppressive rule of the patriarchal rulers. The novel "envision[s] a society in which women surface as emancipated accomplices with the ability to restructure the oppressions inflicted by patriarchy and state on both environment and the female sex" (Panda and Bhattacharya 92). Looking at this perspective, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* can be viewed as an ecofeminist text because nature offers solace to Meiji and thereby enables her to become a woman with a thorough sense of her individuality.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning, 2015, pp. 355–356.
- Agarwal, Bina. "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1992, pp. 119–158. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3178217. Accessed 20 Apr. 2024.
- Chanana, Karuna. "Hinduism and Female Sexuality: Social Control and Education of Girls in India." *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2001, pp. 37–63. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23620149. Accessed 26 May 2024.
- Joseph, Rositta. "Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*: Towards a Universal Feminism." *Academia.edu*, 2012, www.academia.edu/28455021/15_Manjula_Padmanabhan_s_Escape_. Accessed 27 May 2024.
- Khan, Sami Ahmad. "Dom(e)inating India's Tomorrow(s)? Global Climate Change in Select Anglophonic Narratives." *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, Volume 6, Issue 2, 2020, pp. 25–37. Accessed 27 May 2024.
- MacGregor, Sherilyn. "Gender and environment: an introduction." *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Environment*, edited by Sherilyn MacGregor, Routledge, 2017, pp. 1–25.
- Madsen, Peter. "Deep ecology". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 16 May. 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/deep-ecology>. Accessed 18 April 2024.
- Mathur, Suchitra. "Caught between the Goddess and the Cyborg: Third-World Women and the Politics of Science in Three Works of Indian Science Fiction." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 39, no. 3, Sept. 2004, pp. 119–138, doi:10.1177/0021989404047050. Accessed 28 March 2024.
- Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Escape*. Hachette, 2015.
- Panda, Punyashree and Bhattacharya, Panchali. "Oriental Ecofeminism: Contrasting Spiritual and Social Ecofemininity in Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*." *UNITAS*, 2019, pp. 72–96.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Biopiracy*, North Atlantic Books, 2016, pp. 18–24.
- Singh, Vandana. "A Speculative Manifesto." *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet and Other Stories*, Zubaan, 2008, pp. 200–203.
- Smith, Robert Leo and Pimm, Stuart L. "Ecology". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 7 Feb. 2019. Accessed 21 March 2024.

Wegner, Phillip E. *A Companion to Science Fiction*, by David Seed, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 79–95.