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Beyond Reproduction: An Epistemological Search for a "Woman" in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls*

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Abstract. Who is a woman? In a gender-fluid typical world, the answer to this question invites a serious exposition of non-linear and non-binary possibilities. As the biological definition becomes more inclusive of fragmented identities, it becomes extremely complicated to arrive at a simplistic, innocent truth of recognition. Within the third-world dynamics, this question invites more dimensions. Set against the backdrop of mass female genocide on the occasion of perfecting cloning, Manjula Padmanabhan in her works of futuristic dystopian fiction, *Escape* (2015) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2017), has taken up this issue of womanhood and furtively trodden to arrive at a philosophical space that allows the modernist epistemological notion of a "woman" as a well-defined category to reincarnate within a postmodern paradigm to help locate women beyond the generic nuances of reproduction and menial labour. Through analysing the selective works, this research article aims at arriving close to the model of womanhood and depicting the plurality of truth in action.

Keywords: epistemology, dystopian fiction, woman, reproduction, Indian fiction.

Introduction

Dystopian literature is an essentially neutralizing device (Horan 2018, 8) with a hegemonic predominance of a narrative *novum*[1] validated by cognitive logic (Suvin 1992). It abrogates one or more fundamental factors of existence to accommodate extreme possibilities that eventually leave readers and critics alike with philosophical and socio-cultural concerns, hitherto estranged in conscious oblivion. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, the notion of privacy suffers a complete withdrawal under the totalitarian regime of Big Brother,[2] and the subjects (citizens) are under incessant surveillance. Similarly, in *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, the faculty of choice is completely obliterated. For science fiction, the introduction of the *novum* (into the social order in cases of utopian and dystopian fiction)[3] within a familiar narrative not only triggers a cognitive shift (Suvin 1980, 12) but also inspires an epistemic rearrangement (Calvin 2016, 12). This research paper takes into account two works of Indian feminist dystopian fiction: *Escape* (2015) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2017) by Manjula Padmanabhan. Despite being a lightly connected duology, the narrative space of the second book is more global, while the first book is suggestively limited to a futuristic Indian landscape. *Escape* offers an extreme image of patriarchal oppression besides presenting a contrasting image to the prequel; *The Island of Lost Girls* presents a subtle subversion of feminist ideals. Within the scope of the contemporary world order where the recognition of the non-binary gender identity is slowly coming into prominence, the concerned works depict womanhood in the light of the postmodern rendition of fragmented identity. Instead of reasserting the holistic perception of the mythical womanhood, smeared in essentialist characterization through femininity and the pragmatics of reproduction, the works showcase a constantly shifting identity. The recognition of gender-based violence is equally affected by the other dimensions of identity (besides gender), i.e. race, class, and caste (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). The dimension of intersectionality keeps redefining and reshaping the category of women. The practice of standardization of identities becomes more problematized in the context of a third-world nation, as identity politics fails to recognize "intra-group differences." The intersectional components add variegated dynamics to the struggles and possible modes of emancipation for women belonging to different castes, classes, and religions.

1 According to Darko Suvin, the *novum* represents an exclusive and strange newness incorporated within the narrative of science fiction texts. They determine one end of the literary subject matter, while the other end would be the exact recreation of the author's empirical environment (1980, 4).

2 Big Brother is a fictional character and a symbolic representation of the totalitarian regime of Oceania.

3 As proposed by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1980).

The dream of conjuring a single-gender world is not new. The idea of single-sexed societies through gender-based separation has inspired thought experiments on gender to identify the inherent flaws within the feminist or masculinist principles that fail to cater to the comprehensive needs of individuals belonging to a specific gender identity (Attebery 2002, 107). Within fictional narratives, this imagination created works like *Herland* (1979), *The Female Man* (1975), and more. Bearing testimony to scientifically established processes like parthenogenesis,[4] these authors created spaces where the process of reproduction becomes peripheral and taken care of. Women, the only gender identity existing in these societies, function perfectly to run the system. The imagination of an all-male world essentially spawns out of non-fictional truths reflecting patriarchal hegemony, violence against women, female foeticide, female infanticide, constantly deteriorating gender ratio, and so on (Akhter 2020). The first film subscribing to these issues in India is Manish Jha's *Matrubhoomi: A Nation without Women* (2003). The audience is presented with a fictional Indian village (in Bihar) where there is no woman (owing to years of systematic gendercide[5]). The desperate father of five young men accidentally discovers a young woman and convinces (with financial support) her father to marry her off into a coerced space of fraternal polyandry. Padmanabhan's works might be approached as an expansion of Jha's imagination. The reception of this duology usually ascribes the generic identity of experimental science fiction to these works where the author has addressed the "growing gender hierarchies and imbalances, and the fragility of attempts at forging resistance to modes of bio-politics" (Saint 2021, XVI). The existing body of critical works around these dystopian works does not go beyond the idea of the nation, womanhood, sexual violence, and problematized queer identity. Incidentally, being a believer of the non-binary, Padmanabhan consciously steers clear of tags. When asked whether she would like to call herself a feminist, she candidly replied: "No. I do not think about feminism very much anymore. Feminists can be extremely vicious towards other women. We should look beyond gender" (Rao 2019). She believes that women were previously treated with care and compassion because childbearing and rearing were considered crucial for human survival. But owing to the contemporary phenomena of overpopulation, the act of childbearing and rearing are slowly losing their previously assigned significance (Nath 2016). This allows her a space to explore the extremities of gender violence. Padmanabhan once said:

4 Parthenogenesis is a form of reproduction in which an egg can develop into an embryo without being fertilized by a sperm.

5 Gendercide refers to the irrational, agenda-driven practice of killing individuals of a specific gender.

> In the case of *Escape*, the idea presented itself originally as a newspaper "middle" which would take the form of a page from the diary of the last Indian woman left alive […]. I kept thinking that despite all the positive stuff going on, it seemed more likely that women – Indian women anyway – appeared to be on the decline. So that was the context (Deshmukh and Jagtap 2019, 1; emphasis and ellipsis in the original).

Research Objective and Method

The proposed research approaches the impact of the selected texts on available epistemological models concerning the socio-cultural position of women in India and how it challenges and problematizes the monolithic understanding of women as a class, race, or category of human existence. Following the methodology of hermeneutics and close textual analysis, the paper further attempts at drafting how Padmanabhan successfully used this nuanced, postmodern understanding of gender and womanhood to stay true to what she believes in.

The Socio-Cultural Fabric of India and the Context of the Selected Works

In India,[6] the socio-culturally deep-rooted preference for male heirs dictates the insouciance towards female children and their deaths (unborn or newly born) through malicious practices like gender-based discrimination, violence, female foeticide, and female infanticide (Kapur 2020). The fact that the country registers more women than men for the first time after seven decades of independence in the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5)[7] (Kapur 2021) is certainly overwhelming. But, unfortunately, this does not dictate the changes sensitive citizens dream of as the sex ratio expert Jashodhara Dasgupta insightfully puts that the NFHS counts only a limited number of women who belong to specific demographic categories, and there is a bias in it due to the small sample size (Kapur 2021). The representation of the increasing number of women in selective

6 The nation of "Brotherland" in the texts in concern "has a close resemblance to India though it is never mentioned" (Shrivastava 2016), but the narratives are peppered with cultural suggestions and references including attires, food habits, and conversational exchanges. Samira Nadkarni said: "I loved being able to see a dystopian world that I could recognize as specifically Indian and whose machinations didn't need a lot of exposition for me" (Mehta, Nadkarni, and Mike 2016).

7 Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, with the International Institute for Population Sciences scans and observes the population throughout the country to obtain reliable and updated information on fertility, family planning, mortality, and maternal and child health through the National Family Health Survey (NFHS).

and limited indices like these neither represents emancipation nor alters the status of repression. Rather it creates a strange anomaly where the issues of gender-based oppression get subsided being subsumed under the politics of numbers. Conscious recognition of this probable, ambient horror allows a wide berth to Padmanabhan's dystopian imagination of a land where women are exterminated imprudently. Their need as a source of reproduction as part of the civilization to carry the lineage of the species forward has suddenly met an end, as the process of cloning was perfected to create variegated human beings (the generals, the drones, and the replicas) as deemed fit to perform selective tasks. The Generals were a group of morphed (with upgraded intellectual and physical compatibility) men with regressive patriarchal values, with a unified vision of creating a world free from the multifarious nuances of gender heterogeneity. The short-lived drones, "the midget slaves who perform your menial tasks" (Padmanabhan 2015, 256) performed the menial labours, domestic chores that are intrinsically associated with women. And the replicas (copies of surviving males) maintained the population count.

Within this dystopian space, the two central characters of the duology, Meiji – the last surviving girl – and her uncle (later revealed as her father), Youngest, deconstruct and reshape the understanding of womanhood. While *Escape* depicts their journey and struggles to run out of Brotherland, *The Island of Lost Girls* presents the desperation of a father in saving his child. Youngest had undergone sexual reassignment as a bargain with the General to step into the island where men are forbidden to enable Meiji to have a peaceful life and perform an act of espionage. He chose to retain his masculine consciousness within a woman's anatomy. The second book navigates around two parallel threads of exploring womanhood (both physical and psychological). Meiji's scuffle to find peace around her natural anatomy (which has long been kept a secret by her Uncles) on the island is presented against Youngest's (or Yasmine's) fight to accept his sexually reassigned body.

The vision of the Generals to initiate this process of cleansing becomes conspicuous through one of the interviews:

> General: The first task was to create a core group of like-minded individuals. Dissent is the enemy of progress.
> Interviewer: So… a group of clones?
> […]
> Interviewer: Why was it necessary to eliminate females?
> General: Females 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 the females. (Padmanabhan 2015, 255–257)

The reasons that triggered this execution emerged from the hubris of an extreme manifestation of misogynistic toxicity and a drive to abate anything remotely concerning the "feminine" idiosyncrasy. During one of the acts of sexual deviance and violence on Yasmine (the sexually altered self of Youngest) in the second book, the General foregrounds the perspective of being enamoured by the presence of a man's mind in a woman's body (Padmanabhan 2015, 102). The monologue depicts how women were not identified beyond their corporeality. The nuances of femininity, identified by essentialist feminists, adhere to something close to a political necessity to unite women to form a resistance against a common struggle (Stone 2016). Ironic though it is, the unifying, universal characteristic that the Brotherhood used against women is something similar to what they are envisioning. As the General boisterously adduces, "We are the past, the future and the present. We have broken through the shackles of individuality" (Padmanabhan 2015, 356–357). If the biological imperative renders women weak and thrusts them towards a headless craving for breeding, then the impetus of creating a neural network sharing brethren with a completely eradicated sense of subjectivity is no different. What problematizes the narrative even more is the depicted outcome at the onset of the duology of realizing the radical (feminist) dream of ectogenesis.[8] Instead of liberating women from the shackles of patriarchy, it obliterates their identity, necessity, role, and function.

Locating Reproduction as a Defining Standpoint for Womanhood

From Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) to Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), the root of gender-based oppression has empirically been located in the woman's biology. The "tyranny of reproduction"[9] has been identified as the primary deterrent coupled with childcare owing to the delayed cognitive development of human infants. "While the directionality of the definitional connections between 'mother,' 'woman,' and female reproductive function is complex, there is some evidence for the thought that female biology is foundational to the way 'woman' and 'mother' are defined" (MacKay 2020, 348). In the concluding section, MacKay

8 Ectogenesis is the method of developing embryos artificially outside the uterus. Made familiar in Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World* (1932), this process brings forth the possibility of growing a complete human being from a sperm and an egg. This method has been at the centre of radical feminist debates, as they believed this can liberate women from the troubles of pregnancy.

9 This phrase was used by Shulamith Firestone in her feminist manifesto, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), as she firmly believed that the idea of pregnancy is "barbaric" and the source of all oppression for women. This can only be resolved if the practice of ectogenesis is perfected by transferring the embryo into artificial gestation.

furthers the problems associated with a complete realization of ectogenesis, as this might irreversibly alter the gender-biology matrix and demands a rethinking of the social roles of women (MacKay 2020, 353).

For feminist dystopian fiction, the horrors (mostly unidirectional and introduced through the *novum*) usually address one primary epistemological concern: "How do we define a woman?" Though, unlikely, the situations with their atmospheric shock leave a trail of far-fetched but often-thought-of speculations orbiting around the purpose of a woman in a society and how she might identify herself. Earlier, the treatment of womanhood within these dystopian spaces (during the 1970s and 1980s) belonged to a modernist spectrum with the generic crisis. For works like *The Female Man* (2010) by Joanna Russ, an overarching sense of femininity persists following a subtle critique of these oppressive ideologies. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1996) by Margaret Atwood can be considered a take on reproductive choice and bodily agency. But these concerns remain delimited to the white woman's troubles in the name of considering women as a homogeneous group. Melayna Williams in her 2017 article, "For Black Women, *The Handmaid's Tale*'s Dystopia Is Real – and Telling," on the *Hulu* adaptation of the novel discusses how liberal and conservative women have collectively struggled to address the failure of mainstream feminism(s) in voicing the plights of the women of colour, and the critique and consideration of third-wave or intersectional feminism under the influence of the mainstream feminism(s) still suffer the erasure.

The unavailability of representative voices of marginalized women slowly started getting mitigated in works like *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) by Angela Carter or *The Parable Series* (1993–1998) by Octavia E. Butler. Most of the contemporary fiction belonging to this genre has become more inclusive, e.g. *The Power* (2016) by Naomi Alderman, *The Book of the Unnamed Midwife* (2016) by Meg Elison, *Red Clocks* (2018) by Leni Zumas; and more localized, e.g. *The Water Cure* (2018) by Sophie Mackintosh, *Gather the Daughters* (2018) by Melamed Jennie.

South Asian dystopian fiction is a fairly new genre, hence to claim a recurrence of themes will be injudicious. But borrowing from Urvashi Kuhad's attempt in *Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers* (2022) to introduce a set of themes delineated in Indian science fiction, we might boil down the settings of South Asian dystopian fiction to cloning, gender bias, sexual violence, epistemological violence, and a few more. Among the themes of gender-based violence, some of the recurring tropes widely range from a legal implementation of female foeticide to the extermination of women as a race (as seen in the texts of contention of this research paper) or the use of women as a mere reproductive device (*Before She Sleeps* [2018] by Bina Shah) or taking away the rights to gender identity (*Generation 14* [2008] by Priya Sarukkai Chabria) or the use of psychological and physical violence within the safeguard of law to control women in an unnerving ambience of fear (*The Lesson* [2015] by Sowmya Rajendran) or the consciously

directed epistemological violence to extirpate the practice and pleasure of asexual female companionship (*Before She Sleeps* [2018] by Bina Shah). One of the most intriguing aspects of these feminist dystopian narratives is the preponderance of the notion of reproductive choice and bodily agency.

Women's reproductive roles assign them their secondary social status and are considered to be their essential social role to add meaning to their existence (McDaniel 1988, 1). As previously mentioned, the radical feminist vision around liberating women from the "naturally" bestowed upon compulsion of motherhood backfires in the duology. The totalitarian government decides upon eradicating women, as the idea of motherhood runs out of significance and childcare has lost its meaning. But the reception of the text essentially invites concerns and queries that remain unanswered. The artificiality of cloning is used to create a band of neural-network-sharing masculine subhumans and the droneries. As this is perceived to be the first generation of clones, Brotherland[10] still abounds in men, and cloning becomes integral to the maintenance of the count of the populace. Though the families, who had given up their women voluntarily, were awarded favours and droneries, still the horrors run their parallel course for men as well. The episodes of sexual perversion on boys and young men as presented through the character of Swan (the owner of an estate where Drones are produced through cloning) become a case in point. During a heated argument among Pigeon, Bamboo (two of Swan's human workers), and Youngest, the readers are offered a glimpse of the sexual aberration at work: "'You weren't here,' […] 'You don't know what he did.' 'We each had our younger brothers when we came,' said Pigeon. […] 'He only recruited those who could offer him that price. First, he used the young ones. Then he made us watch him use them. Then he made us use them […]'" (Padmanabhan 2015, 239). Besides, the extermination of women leaves out the question of gender non-binaries. What happens to them remains a mystery. The second book showcases the marginalized existence of the non-binaries through the character of Aila (a trans-woman who helped Youngest reach the island) who barely manages to survive in the Zone[11] and experiences recurrent acts of violence. How were women identified during the early hours of the extermination project? The text suggests that the primary focus was probably on the anatomical appearance that determined their identity. The General's recognition of Youngest as a perfect "reverse" (a man in a woman's body) instead

10 The Brotherland and the Brotherhood consisting of the generals with a shared neural network appears as a subtle subversion of the emerging idea of "sisterhood" during the second wave of feminist movements in the USA and parts of Europe. The appeal of theorists like bell hooks to form solidarity among women despite their variegated demands and divergent nature of oppression is parodied through the projection of the Brotherland where the dream of an all-male society is believed to become the final stage of human evolution.

11 The Zone is the space that sustains the economy of this futuristic world through war games between clans.

of a "feem" (a female) delineates the idea. But the revulsion towards women was rooted deep into the feminine behavioural patterns and the conviction that it was the biological impulse that drove them. Hence, the notion that the replacement of biological reproduction with cloning determined the fate of the women appears to be a partial truth. Within the totalitarian discourse of the Generals, the man/woman binary is conformed into and the masculine emerges as the superior:

> Yasmine is my own private creation, my personal sex-machine. His private parts were restructured to suit my needs. He was perfect as a man, gorgeously muscled, tall, dense, powerful. But now he is a man who, while retaining his masculine nature, nevertheless has the body-parts of a Vermin and – ah – now he is beyond superb. (Padmanabhan 2017, 99)

The island does not project its preference for or celebration of reproductive values, but their fixity on Meiji's virginity does not go unnoticed. While most of the girls bear serious scars of either physical or psychological devastation, Meiji appears to be pristine and thus reflects the potential of fertility: "She has a quality of absolute innocence. It's like a titanium shield, that innocence. [...] You may call it virginity if you want, Zera. Or moral purity, Maia. But I maintain that it's something beyond either of these" (Padmanabhan 2017, 174). Women who supposedly resist the oppressive principles of Brotherland eventually end up becoming the other end of the binary extreme.

Feminist Epistemology and Defining the "Woman"

While the modernist schools (per se, liberal, Marxist, radical, and socialist) of feminism tend to approach the issues of the identity of a woman to arrive at a generic category of women as a race, postmodernism (and postmodern feminism) completely abandons this approach and embraces the fluidity of the term. Postmodern philosophy succumbs to the idea of the multiplicity of truth and how it is susceptible to circumstantial changes. As the position of the subject determines the truth, therefore identification of womanhood becomes more of a subjective than an objective concern. Even a close historical observation of the "woman question"[12] in India entails how the iconic model of womanhood has been

12 The position of a woman in India has been a point of contention for the colonizers in rendering validity to the narrative of their civilizing mission. The phrase "woman question" addresses the nuances of this socio-cultural and socio-economic position of women in India.

changing. During the *Swadeshi movement*[13] the emergence of the "new woman"[14] was a socio-cultural need that put the traditional grand narrative of the "Indian woman" in question. Empowered with education, they were expected to strike a fine balance between the occidental and the oriental models (Shrivastava 2009, 14) and contribute considerably to protecting the spiritual principles (which were considered defining components of Indian values) of children. Development in the field of science and technology, socio-political movements, universalization of education, and other progress have changed the approach towards women in India to a certain extent and enabled them to develop a sense of agency.

Since the third wave of feminism and the advent of intersectionality, women's category has been under scrutiny (Zalewski 2000, 40–42). The fragmented identities bear mutually exclusive fragmented crises and concerns. What started as a holistic movement to address a common struggle in the USA and parts of Europe soon suffered its claim, as theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989) or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988) or bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) started disseminating the viability and significance of intersectional politics and introduced an essential difference in the nature of oppressions encountered by non-white, non-first-world women.

The two conflicting threads of feminist epistemology, the modernist approach and the postmodernist approach, primarily deviate on the ground of the idea of a holistic, wholesome "truth" (as mentioned previously), seen as a continuation of the Enlightenment dream, which instead of oppressing individuals would eventually liberate them (Zalewski 2000, 45–47). Whereas the modernist feminist schools adhere to the notion of this innocent truth, the postmodernists run completely against this stream. For them, the idea of truth is fragmented, and there is an inherent pluralism (Hassan 1986, 503) to it, which is susceptible to temporal and cultural changes. The meta-narrative of a woman's identity[15] that functioned as an anchor during the initial days of the gender battle (women's suffrage or property rights for women) changed over time to arrive at discourses like gender performativity (Butler 1988, 520). Modernist feminist epistemology brought in consciousness raising as a significant component for introducing women's perspectives (Firth and Robinson 2016, 5) within the existent epistemological spectrum, which later got perfected through feminist standpoint theory (Gurung 2020, 108).

13 The *Swadeshi* movement was part of the Indian independence movement that focused on the importance of self-sufficiency as a nation and actively contributed to the development of Indian nationalism.

14 The new woman is a representative figure of womanhood in India that nurtures the traditional values and the takeaways of Western education together.

15 The meta-narrative of women's identity locates them as a homogeneous group, the members of which are subjected to similar forms of oppression and marginalization.

Though aggrandized through contextual illustrations by setting the plot against the rise of a ruthless, patriarchal, robotic, subhuman totalitarian power, the attitude of Meiji's family members is analogous to what happens with most of the women in India. The course of action deemed fit to save Meiji was to put her under a prolonged drug-induced adolescence and an epistemological distancing from her body (Padmanabhan 2015, 20). "Women have been raised in such a manner that talking about menstruation and sexual desires in front of a man is a big no" (Aujla 2021). Patriarchal oppression segregates women from their bodies and creates a forbidden territory of vulnerability. With the advent of the fourth wave of feminism and cyberspaces like Menstrupedia,[16] Breast Cancer India,[17] online social movements like #metoo,[18] and progressive digital media content are taking a fresh epistemological turn in India. Besides body positivity, women are rediscovering their bodies, choices, and agencies. Circumstantially, the contemporary time appears lush for texts like *Escape* (2008) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) to bloom, as the narrative shock might just get deservingly absorbed. "I loved that all through *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls*, Padmanabhan keeps pushing back on this idea of what girlhood and womanhood should feel like" (Mehta, Nadkarni, and Mike 2016). A pornographic magazine was slipped into Meiji's room by a drone named Bone with human DNA. This intrigued her into exploring her body, and Meiji's first experience of seeing her genitalia in a mirror disgusted her: "Yes. I used a mirror, so that I could see what I was doing. It looked yucky. Just like in the pictures" (Padmanabhan 2015, 329). Meiji's revulsion reflects the socio-cultural conditioning of othering a woman's body from herself.

Since her childhood, Meiji was denied her true identity by her uncles: Oldest, Middle, and Youngest (arguably her father). She underwent a chemically induced prepubescent stasis, which could turn out to be detrimental – "[i]f we hold her any longer at this threshold, she will never cross over it" (Padmanabhan 2015, 13). With the consequences of this stunted growth, she was forced to put on a prosthetic penis. "'It's known as a prosthetic device,' said Middle, 'but you can call it your pee-pee if you like'" (Padmanabhan 2015, 70). They did not want her to feel different, and all were directed towards saving her and escaping the regime. Meiji oscillated between two extremes. After reaching the island designed to shelter saved women/girls who had fallen prey to emotional and physical violence, from all over the world, she realized that the only way to survive is to stay true to the norms. Despite being unwilling, she was ideologically

16 As a start-up, Menstrupedia offers educational materials to corporates, government organizations, NGOs, and so on to help educate children and adolescents regarding sexual health, puberty, and growing up.

17 An online initiative by the NGO The Pink Initiative to make the populace aware of the country (India) about breast cancer.

18 #metoo is a global movement against sexual harassment, sexual violence, and rape culture. The victims publicly voice their experience on social media platforms.

forced into embracing her womanhood. This forceful acceptance is similar to the overarching practice of modernist feminist politics. "'The feeling of discomfort passes very quickly,' said Vane. 'Nakedness is our natural state, but we are taught to feel ashamed or defenseless when our skin is bare-[…]'" (Padmanabhan 2017, 151). Unknowingly the seeds of epistemological violence were planted from the moment Meiji became the last surviving female soul after "The Change." Her body had constantly been misrepresented, and the flawed interpretation of her existence was depicted as the truth. The question of agency stands equally mutilated on the island as it was in the Brotherland. Women were not allowed to choose for themselves the point on the spectrum of womanhood. They were expected to embrace the established order reasserting the binary of masculine/feminine, and unfortunately it was bodily generated.

Another facet of womanhood has been brilliantly constructed through Youngest/Yasmine where the emphasis is on the body and the anatomy. Yasmine never recognized his reassigned body. He was trapped in it that the world perceived to be a woman's. "He felt like a stranger to his own body. It was his and yet it was completely unfamiliar. It was attractive to him [...]. He felt in awe of it. Afraid almost. Saddened" (Padmanabhan 2017, 52). He could not deny his heteronormative desires when Aila recognized them in his eyes, as "she had kindled genuine desire within him. 'You is still want womanses?'" (Padmanabhan 2017, 53). The reception of the female body as a site of violence has long been considered a common notion. The identification of women through their physical bodies is the root cause of patriarchal oppression. The General and his clone brothers would only recognize women as vermin, scum, and filth, but uncannily they compelled Youngest to convert his body into that of a luscious woman to sexually violate her repeatedly. Though Youngest denies the installation of pleasure-generating nerves, still he was raped. Despite despising the General, Youngest kept on submitting to his barbaric whims, and his lack of choice triggered his fancy. Things appeared to be similar for Youngest, as he was allowed to be included in the populace of the Island. He was convinced into embracing his female corporeal self through forcefully induced pleasure (orgasm). What he had consciously chosen to denounce was imposed upon him: "He heard his breathing change./ His back arched up of his own accord./ His consciousness melted away./ Cries emerged from his throat in a voice he had never heard before" (Padmanabhan 2017, 327–328).

Padmanabhan cautiously treads between the two schools of feminist epistemological approaches. Both her works simultaneously ascertain the validity and the fragility of these stands. Considering Meiji as one of the pivotal points, the readers can witness how discordantly her womanhood unfolds in front of her, forcing her to respond incongruously. While her father (allegedly), her uncles, and her circumstances (in and while escaping Brotherland) impel her to remain

impervious to her womanhood in the first book, the second book is an outrageous exposition of her identity, as she is forced to experience bodily sensations previously she has hardly been allowed to divulge into. Meiji's perspective as a vantage point unearths the true essence of being a woman as part of the man/woman binary within a fictional space. But we eventually arrive at a gender-fluid communion by the end of *The Island of Lost Girls*. Meiji suffers involuntary segregation from her body. Her illusory corporeal oddity appears to be so drastic to her that she recognizes it as a monstrosity: "'I want to know whether or not I've become a monster yet,' she said. 'Woman,' said Youngest" (Padmanabhan 2015, 308). While Meiji is in constant denial of her physicality, Youngest, with a coerced sex reassignment surgery, creates a strange paradox. Both womanhoods are persistently being denied and forced. But, eventually, they make peace with their broken selves. Padmanabhan deftly showcases how everyone has their version of the truth when it comes to defining the self. Her celebration of subjectivity and fluidity of gender identity takes a brilliant postmodern turn and shapes a new understanding of womanhood. For Padmanabhan, "it's important to look beyond gender and beyond body-based boundaries […] to find a higher definition of self" (Pandey 2018). The way Meiji embraces her body and attempts at understanding it despite being discouraged and having no points of reference other than those pornographic magazines sets the tone of self-revelation throughout:

> 'I want you to act your age. If you want to be treated with respect, then you got to behave with dignity –'
> '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 2015, 328–329)

Conclusions

The research article opens on a note of epistemological inquiry concerning the search for definitive model(s) of womanhood but ends up foregrounding an ontological response. Rather than investigating how one can define a woman, we

must focus on the question "what/who is a woman?" The search for an objective framework becomes redundant within the postmodern condition of being. It is the subjectivity that renders meaning to a self. When asked about the blurred gender roles, bent sexual norms, and broken sexual binaries, Padmanabhan replied: "Yet even in today's world, with female genital mutilation and male circumcision, selfhood is a very complex issue" (Nath 2016). She neither cared about the binary nor the existing epistemological models that define womanhood within the limits of female anatomy, the pragmatic functions of motherhood, caregiving, fostering the domestic space, and reflection of femininity. Padmanabhan's stance is furthered in the works of Judith Butler. She discusses the assumption abundant in feminist theory concerning the existing identity of the category of woman. Though this recognition is integral in initiating feminist interests, goals, and political representations within the discourse, it simultaneously limits the range of the gender spectrum (Butler 2006, 38). Padmanabhan breaks free from this grand narrative submerged in the binary of pitting women against men. The selected works, through the characters of Meiji, Youngest/Yasmine, and Alia, highlight the significance of the subjective association. All of them are women but unlike each other. Their truths of womanhood harness multiple senses of exclusivity. They are free from the static teleological requisites for becoming a woman.

The initial objective of equal rights to that of men has changed its course of action to slide into a terrain of gender subjectivity. "How does one identify as a woman?" is not a question that inspires a monolithic response. To keep the feminist resistance going, one must strive to look for harmony between the importance of subjectivity and a few grounds of shared interests. Karissa Sanbonmatsu (2019) in her TED talk "The biology of gender, from DNA to the brain" asks the question: "What does it mean to be a woman"? Being a trans-woman, she offers us an insight into the realm of this subjectivity by elegantly striking a fine balance between "the shared sense of commonality" and the acceptance of individuality (TED 2019). Knowing one is a woman and acknowledging that it is not the only available possibility might help us reach the postmodern corpus of womanhood. In India, the nature of the reception is different. While most women are absorbed into the ideological model of sacrifice and suffering to serve others blurring the difference between self-care and self-indulgence, what they mean to the social order and where they belong are mutually exclusive and equally significant. It is their faculty of being human that is at stake more than their identity as a woman. The choice of gender, though primary, is still in search of a space of acceptance, comfort, and fluidity.

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