

REWRITING SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE FEMALE BODY: A FEMINIST READING OF ESCAPE BY MANJULA PADMANABHAN

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Abstract

Indian Science Fiction in English (ISFE) as a genre has been evolving in the past few years and contemporary writing questions the relationship between knowledge, power, and gender in technologically mediated futurist societies. But despite the growing attention, there is a need to look at Science Fiction and its portrayal of the future, as to how scientific knowledge is imagined as a gendered and exclusionary system. This paper examines Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* to demonstrate how the female body becomes a site of scientific knowledge, threat, and epistemic reordering. The study draws on feminist and science and technology studies to analyse and understand how knowledge systems are constructed, governed, and destabilised. The methodology will be a close textual analysis to analyse how knowledge is controlled and constructed through surveillance, reproductive control, and embodied knowledge. The examination argues that Meiji's body functions as 'forbidden knowledge' as it destabilises the regime's scientific authority and epistemic monopoly. Thus, this reading aims to signify how the female body is used in ISFE to question the authority of scientific rationality in a patriarchal future. By studying this, the research contributes to scholarly conversations on gendered knowledge, and the epistemic power of futurity in ISFE.

Keywords: Indian Science Fiction, Gender and Power, Feminist Epistemology, Futurism, Embodied Knowledge.

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Introduction:

Science fiction writing for long has been a method to examine the relationship that exists between knowledge, power, and social organisation; especially in futures that have been shaped by scientific and technological forces. Writers of Indian Science Fiction in English (ISFE), often use dystopian narratives to question as well as expose the use of scientific rationality as a tool to regulate bodies, identities, and futures to align with their authoritarian structures. Knowledge production, legitimisation and how it is used as a means to govern people are central themes of speculative imaginaries.

Such a dystopian world has been presented in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* where scientific knowledge is used to create an all-male regime; thus, ensuring a systematic erasure of women from society. In such a world, science is not simply a tool to progress but an ideological system that defines their worldview, restricts or controls production, and determines the future itself. The

elimination of the female body in *Escape* points to a biopolitical intervention where women's lives and their lived experiences are not considered as legitimate knowledge.

Thus, the paper argues that in *Escape* the female body is constructed as a site of forbidden knowledge and its existence threatens the regime's scientific authority. The novel through Meiji, the last surviving women in their world, destabilises the objective and rational foundations of a patriarchal society. Her body thus becomes a deviation from the existing scientific framework - a body of knowledge that cannot be completely explained, assimilated, or controlled, exposing the limits of the regime's knowledge system.

The paper draws upon feminist epistemology and theories of knowledge and power to examine *Escape* as an epistemic conflict between gendered knowledge and institutionalised scientific rationality. The paper by analysing pivotal moments of surveillance, resistance, and reproductive control presents the novel's critique of epistemic politics of the future; how control over knowledge decides which bodies are permitted to shape a future. While doing so, the paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions on gender, science, knowledge creation within ISFE and dystopian literature.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative approach to investigate the relations between gender, power, and scientific knowledge in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*. To analyse the novel, close textual analysis has been applied to understand the continuous involvement of science in the creation of an ideological as well as an institutional force in the dystopian setting of *Escape*. The paper, therefore, focuses on representations of scientific authority, the regulation of female bodies, and the gendered construction of knowledge with this narrative. This methodology aids in analysing how Science Fiction presents complex social and epistemic concerns through narrative and symbolic representation.

As mentioned earlier, the primary method adopted is close textual analysis, to ensure a meticulous reading of selected scenes, narrative moments, and recurring motifs present within the text. Detailed attention has been given to scenes that establish surveillance, bodily regulation, reproductive control, and the administration of scientific knowledge. To understand the construction of a gendered epistemic order, language, imagery and narrative structure are closely examined. The aim is to not offer a summarisation of the plot but an analytical interpretation of the scenes as sites where power relations and knowledge systems become visible and contested. With the help of these textual evidences, the selected moments pose broader questions of authority, resistance, and exclusion.

The analysis is guided and shaped by feminist epistemology and science and technology studies, providing a theoretical lens for investigating how knowledge production, legitimisation, and control takes place. The study specifically draws on theories of situated knowledges and strong objectivity articulated by scholars Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding. Such a reading challenges the assumption of scientific neutrality as social location plays a crucial role in knowledge creation. Further, these theoretical perspectives are used as an analytical tool to identify patterns within the text and question gendered exclusion, embodiment, as well as the interrelation between scientific rationality and power.

Although this paper engages in detailed analysis of the novel, the study is limited to only *Escape* and does not adopt a comparative approach or attempt a comprehensive survey of ISFE. Thus, this study presents a thorough reading to understand the correlation between scientific knowledge and scientific authority in a dystopian narrative.

Review of Literature:

There has been an expansion of critical scholarship on ISFE in recent years. Scholars are now taking keen interest in analysing speculative narratives and its engagement with questions relating to technology, nation, power, and futurity. Indian Science Fiction and Technology studies as well as dystopian writings have established the genre's ability to critique environmental crises, authoritarian governance, and socio-political anxieties that have emerged from postcolonial and globalised contexts. *Escape*, according to Singh, is seen as a pioneering work by a woman writer in Indian Science Fiction written in English. Mukhopadhyay compares her work to Begum Rokeya Hossain and Vandana Singh who have been using science fiction to critique India's gender scenario. The themes and the issues that *Escape* engages with like sex-selective abortion, gender-based violence, environmental degradation create a "feminist sublime" that challenges the androcentric narratives and helps reconceptualise womanhood and biological identity (Vinod).

Scholarship suggests that *Escape* has not just been analysed from a gender perspective but through various lenses like archetypal, ecofeminist, posthumanist, or bildungsroman lens. Vasavi applies an archetypal reading to *Escape* drawing from the Jungian concept of the collective unconscious and the collective shadow to investigate the notion of woman as "other". Such an approach highlights the embedding of patriarchal ideologies in cultural myths as well as collective psychology which rationalises female genocide and gender discrimination. Thus, such an analysis exposes the deeply rooted cultural beliefs implanted by socialisation that perpetuates women's marginalisation. Binani and Singh by employing the ecofeminist lens, explores the relationship between gender and environmental issues highlighting the novel's critique of both patriarchal dominance and ecological degradation. In a way, it suggests that gender and ecological justice should be reconceptualised between humans and nature. Such multiplicity of interpretations suggests that a work like *Escape* resists a singular interpretation.

Scholars have constantly identified *Escape* as a strong critique of patriarchal violence and gender-based oppression as an extension or deduction of the gender inequalities in the existing Indian society. Navarro-Tejero's analysis highlights how the novel by using the dystopian set-up explores "technoculture in the context of female genocide" which echoes the concerns about sex selective abortion and violence against women in Indian society. Jain and Jha analyse it through a bildungsroman lens examining the identity formation of the female adolescent protagonist via a bodily experience and resistance that acts as a tool to challenge and resist the tyrannical societal norms. It highlights the parallels between the speculative future of the novel and the "precarious condition of women in India" serving as a magnifying lens that exposes the end of reasoning that allows such violence and discrimination.

Basu and Tripathi use a post-modern approach to describe the work as a search for women in a "gender-fluid world" posing a challenge to biological essentialism. It tries to understand the social category of 'woman' in a world where women have been biologically eliminated and replaced by clones. It becomes an epistemological concern given the novel's female genocide and mass cloning.

Sharma explores the novel's engagement with power and body politics within an Indian postcolonial setup where patriarchal power can be contested by recognizing the body as a site of both oppression and resistance.

Many scholars connect Padmanbhan's earlier play *Harvest* (1997) that deals with organ trafficking and bodily commodification to *Escape* expanding the idea of the body as a commodity and the politics of the body. Mathur in her analysis of Indian science fiction works which includes *Harvest*

examines the neo-colonial implications of economic globalisation for third-world women, resonating the theme of gender violence in *Escape* within a neo-colonial context.

Padmanabhan's *Escape* has been read as a feminist dystopia critiquing patriarchal control, authoritarianism, governance, regulation of the female body that leads to the erasure of women as a social group. However, limited attention has been given to how this control has been established. Therefore, there is a need to look at *Escape* and how it conceptualises scientific knowledge. The paper tries to highlight how the female body becomes a sight of embodied and forbidden knowledge by critiquing the politics of futurity i.e. who has the power to shape the future.

Discussion:

I. Science as Epistemic Authority in *Escape*

In *Escape*, science is not only used as a means of technological advancement but also as an epistemic authority that is further used for administrating the social order, bodies, and futurity represented in their dogma "Science is our religion" (Padmanabhan ch. 41). The dystopian society presented in the novel is built around a rigid hierarchy of specialists who hold the access to scientific knowledge. This authority gets legitimised through the positioning of science as an indisputable source of truth and using language of rationality, efficiency, and objectivity as the General declares, "We are the logical end point of evolution. For those who have the faculty of reason, it is beyond doubt" (Padmanabhan ch. 41). Such a framework centralises, institutionalises and detaches knowledge from ethical considerations, and uses it to reinforce a system scientific rationality replaces any moral deliberation.

In *Escape*, scientific knowledge functions as a method of regulation and surveillance through tools such as "Dynamic Surveillance" teams (Padmanabhan ch. 41). The need of the state to rely on data and biological management, does reflect a broader concern of control which happens via the control of life itself. Scientific reasoning is used to justify the elimination of women as it gets framed as a biological problem instead of an ethical issue, such as when the General characterizes the mass annihilation of two-thirds of the population as "drain-clearing" for a world he claims was "suffocating in its own excrement" (Padmanabhan ch. 16). Such scientific supremacy gives the regime the power to naturalise its violence, allowing the erasure of women as an essential and rational solution rather than an act of epistemic and bodily eradication.

The interesting part of the novel is the portrayal of science as a rigid system that does not allow alternative forms of existence. It privileges detached expertise and dismisses emotional, experiential, and embodied forms of knowledge as irrational or irrelevant. The regime ensures to maintain an epistemic monopoly on knowledge by officially permitting only sanctioned knowledge that can be known, imagined, or questioned as the General declares in the interview, "We know whatever we need to know, and reject the rest" (Padmanabhan ch. 16). Thus, science is used to create a disciplinary force that does create an epistemic conflict within the narrative.

II. The Female Body as Forbidden and Embodied Knowledge

In a world where science dominates and Meiji is the last surviving woman - her body materialises as an epistemic disruption, a form of symbolic knowledge that cannot be integrated within the regime's scientific framework. Meiji's existence is dangerous for the regime as it exposes the shortcomings of scientific rationality which the General claims is the, "logical end point of evolution... beyond doubt" (Padmanabhan ch. 41). As her body carries biological, emotional, and experiential knowledge, it challenges the regime's claim to knowledge creation and control.

From a feminist epistemological point of view, Meiji's body is a site of lived knowledge i.e. her embodied experience - fear, memory, resistance, or vulnerability - they all contribute to forming a

knowledge base that challenges the regime's detached and instrumental science. Thus, Meiji's body is threatening as it resists the scientific capture making it uncontrollable and irreducible to a data or biological specimen.

The regime has attempted to surveil as well as contain the existence of women in their world which highlights how Meiji's body is a site of forbidden knowledge. Therefore, the state's desire to control or manage her existence emphasises the fear that her body represents: the return of gendered difference, reproductive possibilities and alternative futures. The General's claim of them being the "sculptours of the world" exposes the violence done on women's bodies in the name of rational order.

Espace positions the female body as epistemically disruptive, which helps it challenge authoritative narratives of scientific objectivity. Thus the novel does suggest that when embodied and gendered experiences are removed from science, it ends up producing a limited and partial perspective of the world. Therefore, Meiji's body is a site of epistemic resistance, which highlights how women's embodied knowledge challenges the patriarchal governance that depends on the erasure of gendered subjectivity.

III. Epistemic Politics of Futurity

In *Escape*, there is a conflict that occurs between scientific authority and embodied knowledge which finally unfolds as a struggle over who controls the future. The control that the regime creates over scientific knowledge allows it to dictate not just the present conditions of his world but also the kind of future that is permitted to exist. The state forecloses reproductive and social possibilities by abolishing women, thereby ensuring they construct a future that is biologically stable and forever surviving yet epistemically impoverished. Thus, futurity is governed by knowledge systems that control whose bodies are permitted to shape what comes next.

Meiji's body embodies a future that is possible beyond the regime's epistemic order. Her survival undermines the regime's authority as her presence represents a path that science cannot neither predict nor can it contain. Her existence does signify that the future is not the sole outcome of technological planning and advancement but it is deeply intertwined with gender, embodiment, and lived experience. Thus, the novel establishes that power over knowledge determines who has the access to the future itself manifesting in Eldest's admission that while the state's path leads to certain death, the path of Meiji's survival "ends in a question mark. Given the times, that question mark is our golden hope" (Padmanabhan ch. 5).

The novel with the help of Meiji reclaims futurity as a contested space rather than a scientifically preestablished outcome. Thus, it exposes the presupposition that scientific rationality can alone secure a viable future, instead suggesting that scientific rationality becomes destructive when it excludes embodied and gendered forms of knowing. In doing so, *Escape* aligns with feminist critiques of technocratic futures that prioritise control over care, efficiency over ethics, and abstraction over lived reality.

Conclusion:

To conclude, this paper examined Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escaped* and how it builds an exclusionary system with the help of scientific knowledge that is gendered and used to govern bodies and futures within a dystopian society. The paper analyzes science as an epistemic authority, and shows how centralisation of knowledge and detachment from embodied experience enables the violent regulation and erasure of women. Thus in the novel, through the figure of Meiji, the female body is shown as a site of forbidden knowledge and her existence destabilises the regime's epistemic monopoly.

Drawing on feminist studies, this reading illustrates that *Escape* challenges the most powerful assumption about science being objective by revealing the limits of knowledge systems that deny gendered and lived experience. Meiji's body reveals the violence that underlying scientific rationality when it is mobilised to control futurity. Thus, the female body is not merely a biological entity but also a critical site of knowledge production and resistance.

Escape by establishing the epistemic politics of futurity contributes to the broader conversation within ISFE about who is allowed to imagine, inhabit, and shape the future. This analysis highlights the importance of examining science fiction not only as a speculative genre but also as a critical space for interrogating how knowledge, power, and gender intersect in the making and unmaking of futures.

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