

FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF SUBJECT IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *ESCAPE*

*Arathi Babu, Ph. D Research Scholar; Research and Post Graduate Department of English,
St. Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Thrissur; Kerala, India*

*Dr. Pius T.K, Associate Professor; Research and Post Graduate Department of English,
St. Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Thrissur; Kerala, India*

Abstract:

*The novel **Escape** by Manjula Padmanabhan is set in a dystopian landscape ruled by a totalitarian ruler simply named as General. Dystopian novels often feature totalitarian authorities who use propaganda, misinformation, and manipulation of past, surveillance and lies to subjugate their people and make them willing subjects. The novel *Escape* has many similarities to Orwell's dystopia. The dystopia in *Escape* can be termed as "Orwellian", a term derived from Orwell's description of the dystopia in his novel. The General in the novel is an autocrat who uses propaganda, misinformation and surveillance to make the citizens of Brotherland his subjects. According to Foucault in "Subject and Power", the word Subject has two meanings- subject to someone else's will and subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates, makes subject to. The paper studies how citizens in Brotherland are rendered as subjects in the light of Foucault's conceptualization of subject.*

Key words: *Dystopia, Foucault, Orwellian, Propaganda, Subject.*

Introduction

Escape is a 2008 dystopian novel written by Manjula Padmanabhan. *Escape* as its name suggests is about the escape of Meiji from the forbidden country aided by her guardian Youngest. The novel is set in Forbidden Country or "the Brotherhood" as the General calls it. It is ruled by General a despotic ruler and his clone brothers who were mass produced in laboratories. In her review Jaishree Misra gives a concise summary of the novel, "Escape is the story of teenager Meiji who is the only surviving female in a country that has wiped out the fairer sex. The land is ruled by a General and marshalled by his marauding Boyz. Meiji has been kept hidden in an estate and reared by her three Uncles Uncle Zero, Uncle One and Uncle Two". The General kills all females in his Brotherland after rising to power as he believes they are vermins not fit to occupy his Brotherland. The time referred to as the Change in the novel is marked by extermination of all females. The General justifies the violence on women to their inferior status- their low intellect and lack of strength.

The Glossary of Literary Terms defines dystopia as "an unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination" (416). The dystopia in *Escape* can be described as "Orwellian". The adjective Orwellian is derived from George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Orwellian dystopia is characterised by a totalitarian regime, misinformation, surveillance, propaganda, denial of truth, manipulation of past. The word "Orwellian" has been accepted into the English language as an adjective that is often used to describe a totalitarian dystopia characterised by extreme governmental control and subjection of people.

The Forbidden Country like in *Nineteen Eighty Four* is ruled by a totalitarian regime headed by General and his clone brothers. The General and his ancestors rise to power by suppressing all dissent

against their authority. The invention of clone technology by General's ancestors leads to the birth of General and his clone brothers who effectively terrorize the people into submission of their rule and authority. Each territory is ruled by General and his clone brothers who are "all continuously radio linked in some way" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 31). The General's dictates runs throughout the country. Those who supported and sided with the General's rule are awarded with "incentive schemes, safe havens, protected water supplies, unlimited food stocks and sophisticated treatments to pre-empt radiation sickness" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 305) and those who oppose his rule had "No warnings, no shelters, no hope". The General's regime like in Orwell's novel uses propaganda to spread misinformation as well as to manipulate the truth. The only available literatures in Brotherland are the manuals published by the General for the citizens. Manuals like *A Manual for Bold Soldiers*, *The Annals*, *The Thoughts*, *The Generals: A Plural Life* propagandize General's vision and obfuscate and manipulate events and truths from the past or from the Time Before. Panoptic surveillance is another feature of Orwellian dystopia. Surveillance mechanisms are widely used by totalitarian regimes to police individuals and suppress any dissent. The security and surveillance measures employed by General in *Escape* are with the intention of disciplining his subjects and also for rooting out any delinquencies. The General uses a number of tools like surveillance orbs, satellites, data records, Boyz or General's equivalent of police force for this purpose. Therefore the dystopia in *Escape* can be aptly described as Orwellian. As in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* the dystopia is characterised by intense government control and subjection.

The creation of Subjects in Brotherland

The General along with all the citizens in Brotherland can be said to be subjects of a patriarchal discourse whose main emphasize is a male supremacist attitude. The Brotherland in *Escape* along with the Generals is "the result of a particular historical process" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 320). The extermination of women, the release of cement rot bacterium and the rise of cadre of cloned Generals eventually leads to the transformation of the country and the creation of Brotherland- "a self-contained world, impervious to external interference" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 306). The citizens of Brotherland are bound by the law of General and impervious to any of the outside influences.

Foucault's main proposition is that "the subject is produced within discourse" (qtd. in Hall, "The Work of Representation" 47). The subject of discourse is never outside the discourse because it must be subjected to discourse. Foucault defines discourse in his *Archaeology of knowledge*: "We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained); it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined" (117). Discourse is a system of representation which governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. The object of discourse is what is given to the speaking subject. The subject can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces, it can also become the object through which power is relayed but it can never stand outside power/knowledge as its source and author.

The General and the citizens in Brotherland who are misogynists are subjects of a discourse which values male supremacy. Discourses cannot be traced to their point of origin. They can only be studied in their conditions of emergence. The Brotherland is not a sudden manifestation or the product of discursive structures created by the General and his forefathers. As the General himself states that various forms of elimination have been carried out in the years prior to the Change. The author Padmanabhan has depicted patriarchy in its worst form in the characterization of General and depiction of Brotherland. Her inspiration for the novel is the rampant misogyny and violence towards women in the present day world; in her interview to the blog *Jabberwock* she says:

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. It was just

the fingerprint of an idea I had around the turn of the millennium, when there was talk of the Year or Decade of the Woman and 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.

Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. According to Sylvia Walby in *Theorizing Patriarchy*, “patriarchy is indispensable for analysis of gender inequality” (20) and there has always been “key patriarchal structures which restrict women and help to maintain male domination” (6). The concepts like masculinity and femininity are patriarchal constructs which belongs to a discourse which values male supremacy and dominance. Patricia Sexton suggests that ‘male norms stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body.’ (qtd. in Vanitha.R. and Bhaskar 11). This is amply exemplified in *Escape* by the men who inhabit the womanless nation.

The existence of women is outlawed in Brotherland. The General exercises considerable influence over his citizens. He distorts all facts about females and disseminates his bigoted views through his manuals. The time preceding the annihilation of women and emergence of the General called as Time Before is unknown to the citizens because of the destruction of all traces of the past. The citizens in Brotherland have no idea about the Time Before; “We don't know what it was like before the Change so we don't worry about what it might be like if we created another Change” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 263). They are led to believe a women's sole role is reproduction. The General's manuals contains misogynistic statements; “They were weak. They were unfit. They were different.”, “Drones are what the women should have been- servile, deaf and dumb”. These manuals equate women with drones- the midget slaves produced by the Generals. As a result of this, the citizens in Brotherland believe women to be only as good as drones. In fact the General prefers to call women as “vermin” thereby denying them human dignity. Clone technology is invented by General's ancestors which replaces female reproduction. Mothering, nurturing and gestation have no relevance in the here as they are believed to be effete concepts which are replaced by the much superior clone technology. The clone technology is invented with the intent of preventing contamination by only using the blood specimen of men for producing offspring as Eldest one of the characters in the novel explains, “Indeed it is about the continuance in the highest and most refined form: relieved of the contamination of dual parentage. There is no reason to fear eventual degeneration and race annihilation.” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 73). The propaganda spread by the General often praised the superiority of clone technology. In his manual *The Generals: A Plural Life* the General states: “We took the Mother out of Nature”. The manuals served to foster the belief that female reproduction was something contaminated by its very nature compared to clone technology. The destruction of all existing literatures, genocide of women and the dissemination of General's manuals leads to the creation of Brotherland- a male preserve inhabited by misogynists who believe a woman's worth and utility is tied to her reproductive role and manual labour. The men in Brotherland are misogynists who do not feel the need for a special breed to give birth to men. This is most evident in the attitude and beliefs of the estate workers in swan's estates who have a distorted notion of a woman. Events in the Time Before or the time of the existence of women remain a mystery to those in the Brotherland. For instance, Bamboo reveals that in the Time Before that “even peasants had females sometimes even as much as one for each grown man” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 241) which he believes is too good to be true. Pigeon, another worker in the same estate finds it difficult to believe that “there are females for each man in other worlds” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 242) even if “there might be a few corners of reality, in which customs are different” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 242). Blackson, another estate worker, gives a different account about the purpose and extinction of women in Brotherland. According to him the sole purpose of “women” was to bear children. These women were considered as dim-witted and incapable of taking care of their needs thereby needing the instant protection

and supervision of men. He attributes the genocide of women in Brotherland as a preventive measure to contain the mysterious illness that afflicted females.

The General destroys all existing literature in Brotherland to propagate his vision of reality. He disseminates distorted facts and misinformation about females to the men in Brotherland. The only remaining literature in Brotherland is the General's manuals which are conduct books for his citizens. These manuals present alternative version of reality- one that the General wants his citizens to believe blindly and adhere to. Manuals such as *A Manual for Bold Soldiers*, *The Thoughts*, *The Lectures*, *Drone Culture*, *The Principles*, *The Generals*; *We are Tomorrow* contains General's homilies for his citizens. The General's motto is "perfect ignorance opens the path to perfect obedience". The General exercises power over his citizens by keeping them in a state of ignorance and by feeding them with lies, propaganda, and misinformation. The authorities who control systems of knowledge exercise considerable power since what is accepted as truth or knowledge determines who one is and what one does. In his *History of Sexuality Vol I* Foucault shows this correlation between knowledge and power. The General strictly controls the information available to his citizens thereby keeping them in a state of subjugation.

According to Sara Mills in *Discourse* "...discourse causes a narrowing of one's field of vision, to exclude a wide range of phenomena from being considered as real or as worthy of attention, or as even existing; thus, delimiting a field is the first stage in establishing a set of discursive practices" (46). Discourses operate in a field of constraint which makes it possible to say certain statements while excluding others. Many concepts like heterosexual relationships, kinship, blood relations, God are out of the purview of General's Brotherland. All heterosexual relationships remain banned because of the outlawing of the very existence of women. It is a crime to have affiliation to one's own kin or blood relations since the idea of Brotherland signifies collectivity and collective ethic with no place for individuality. The General and his regime extol the virtues of collective ethic and do not give importance to names and individuality. According to the General, "female are driven by biological imperatives that lead them to compete for breeding rights" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 257). He justifies the genocide of women as a necessary measure required to "control breeding technology and collective ethic" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 257). Each individual can be easily replicated by clone technology even after the death of that individual, individuality ceases to be of any import in Brotherland. Words like woman, sister, mother, God are banned from the vocabulary for being remnants of a past which is corrupted. The General and his regime are against the concept of God and organized religion. The word "God" remains banned in Brotherland as Youngest explains, "It used to be a very common word, but it's not allowed anymore. I mean we're not officially allowed to say it" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 277). All literatures have also been destroyed for being remnants of this corrupted past as a result of which the citizens in Brotherland have no books to depend upon in a time of need. For instance youngest does not know how to deal with his growing sexual desire for Meiji as he does not have any books to refer or any authority to consult regarding this problem, "there used to be libraries of literature devoted to this lonely battle but we live in a time and place when the struggle has been eliminated from our lives. Your position used to have centuries of precedent behind it, yet now you're alone and can find no guidebooks to light your path" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 37). The citizens are subjects whose social practices and beliefs are constrained within the narrow field of discourse.

Surveillance as a Disciplinary Mechanism

In "The Subject and the Power" Foucault states that a subject is someone who is "subject to someone else by control and dependence" (331). It also implies a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. Disciplinary power is a form of power which makes individuals docile bodies. It operates through invisibility;

Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is

exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 187).

Disciplinary mechanisms like surveillance are meant to discipline individuals and produce a docile body; "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 202-03). The development of a technology with the dual capacity for broadcasting and receiving propaganda and surveillance is hailed as a turning point in the history of state power as explained in a passage from the novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*:

With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end. Every citizen, or at least every citizen important enough to be worth watching, could be kept for twenty-four hours a day under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propaganda, with all other channels of communication closed (Orwell 259).

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault uses an adaptation of Jeremy Bentham's idea of the panopticon to demonstrate the impact that constant surveillance has not only on an individual, but also on society as a whole. The panopticon is a prison design; a cylindrical building where inmates are invisible to one another, but are all visible to a guard station in the centre of the building. Guards however will not always be observing each inmate to check they are behaving and following the rules. The point of the panopticon is that control is achieved through what Foucault calls 'disciplinary power', a form of power that is constant, unnoticeable and internalized. As inmates are not sure whether they are being watched at any one time, they must always act in accordance to the rules. Control is thus achieved through self-surveillance as the fear of being caught breaking the rules keeps them in line with expectations. The totalitarian regime headed by the General uses a number of surveillance tactics to discipline individuals. He uses a permanent guard of three hundred young men known as "the Boyz" for surveillance. The Boyz changed every two months and was also responsible for the General's security and wellbeing. The Boyz conducted tours on their motorbikes looking for potential delinquents and also accompanied General in his inspection of the estates. The citizens of Brotherland fear Boyz. They fear being caught by the Boyz. Moreover, the Boyz harass and bully the citizens. The fear and anxiety is evident in the words of gypsy who warns Youngest about the coming of Boyz, "There is a company of boy warriors headed this way". The General made use of satellites to monitor every movement of his citizens. The Boyz are tasked with the responsibility of maintaining and monitoring the satellite records. It is not possible to evade the General's vision as "the satellites can zoom in on the pearl drop in your ear, but only if they know where to look- and of course, they won't even be interested in looking unless our General tells them to" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 48). The General also creates "a database that accounts for every sentient being in our domain" which is updated every twenty four hours for monitoring and surveillance purpose. Modern equipment's like Dynamic Surveillance Orbs are used for surveillance. The orb was a vehicle equipped to climb up the sides of buildings like a giant spider, prying at will into the lives of residents. Each one had two Boyz inside, patrolling the city day and night, looking for law breakers and potential dissidents, taking pictures and recording conversations.

The internalization of norms by every individual leads to a homogeneous society where everyone thinks alike. According to Sara Mills in *Rutledge Critical Thinkers: Michel Foucault*, "A further problem which can be seen in the description of disciplinary regimes is that the individual subject is seen to be subjected to the point where resistance to these practices and procedures is futile, so ingrained are they in individuals themselves" (44). The fear of transgressing General's orders makes the citizens self-police themselves which has even resulted in the Boyz being idle since there was not much policing to do, "it was

not uncommon for whole groups of Boy warriors to fall prey to murderous infighting. There was so little for them to do, so few transgressors against the General's regime, that they had lost their edge as a fighting unit" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 323). The fear of transgressing the General's orders leads the citizens to self-police themselves. For instance, Pigeon rejects Youngest's suggestion to take over the estate following the estate owner's death as "The penalty for peasants doing estate work is a long slow death. That's what I've heard. And in spite of all that has happened here, I'm not yet ready for death" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 238).

The surveillance mechanisms prevailing in the Forbidden Country have not only resulted in "zero vagrancy and negligible violent crime" as claimed by the General but also a suppression of healthy dissent and rebellion which is not possible in a totalitarian society.

Conclusion

According to Stuart Hall in "Who Needs Identity?" "Identity are points of temporary attachments to subject positions that discursive practices construct for us" (19). The concept of subject is enmeshed with that of the concept of identity. Disciplinary and discursive practices leads to the creation of subjects. Masculinity is a patriarchal concept which emphasizes values such as togetherness, technological superiority, aggression and autonomy. The citizens of Brotherland embody these values. Patriarchy is based on a differentiation and discrimination between man and woman. The gender discriminatory social practices, misogynistic attitudes, sexual violence, female infanticide, genital mutilation, the binary concepts of masculinity and femininity are concepts created by patriarchy and are part of this discourse which only values male supremacy. Brotherland itself is a term invented by the General to show that the country is a male preserve free of the taint of woman as he states "the word nation is made ugly on account of its association with nativity, with birth, with nature and, by association, with excess its very association with nativity" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 77). Surveillance as a disciplinary mechanism and the discursive limits imposed on the citizens keeps them in a perpetual state of subjection.

Bibliography

1. Abrahms, M.H., Geoffrey Galt Harpham. "utopias and dystopias". *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th ed. 2012. Print.
2. Faubion, James D, Ed. *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954- 1984 Volume Three*. New York: The New Press. Print.
3. Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972. Print.
4. _____. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. NY: Vintage Books, 1995.
5. Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation". *Representation : Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Ed. Stuart Hall. London : Sage Publications, 1997. 13-74. Print.
6. _____. "Who Needs Identity?" *Identity: A Reader*. Ed. Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman. London: Sage Publications, 2002. 15-30. Print.
7. Mills, Sara. *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Michel Foucault*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print
8. Misra, Jaishree. "Escape Manjula Padmanabhan". *Reflections of a Silverfish*. Wordpress, 21 May. Web. 1 February 2018.
9. _____. *The New Critical Idiom: Discourse*. India: Routledge, 2007. Print..
10. Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty Four*. New Delhi: Finger Print Classics, 2017. Print.
11. Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Escape*. India: Picador, 2008. Print.
12. _____. *The Island of Lost Girls*. India : Hachette, 2015. Print.
13. R, Vanitha and Bhaskar, Pramila. "The Dynamics of Post-Colonial Ecofeminism and Hegemonic Masculinities in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*". *Sai Om Journal of Arts and Education* 4.1 (2017): 4-11. Web. 22 January 2018.
14. Singh, Jai Arjun. "Q&A with Manjula Padmanabhan". *Jabberwock*. Blogger, 7 November 2008. Web. 5 January 2018.
15. Walby, Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Cambridge : Basil Blackwell, 1991. Print.