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India in the Feminist Dystopian Novels of Sowmya Rajendran and Manjula Padmanabhan

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Abstract: Dystopias are bad societies or places with worse living conditions than the present for their inhabitants. There has been a slew of Indian English dystopian novels set in India which raises issues endemic to India. The present study analyses depiction of India in two such novels namely Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and Sowmya Rajendran's *The Lesson*. These novels also belong to the subgenre of feminist dystopia. Both the novels raise pertinent feminist concerns specific to India. The depiction of India is viewed in the light of the dystopian genre and the subgenre of feminist dystopia. India presented in both the texts is a dystopian one. The article studies the depiction of India using definitions of dystopian genre and feminist dystopia.

Key Words: India, Feminist dystopia, Dystopia, *Escape*, *The Lesson*.

Sowmya Rajendran is an Indian English writer who has written the dystopian novel *The Lesson* (2015). *The lesson* as its title indicates is about delivering a lesson to the errant women in the future Indian society and is also a reflection of our present-day gender problems. The novel presents an alternative vision of India in which women who transgress moral norms and boundaries are punished with rape. *Escape* (2008), Manjula Padmanabhan's novel, is about a perilous journey or escape from the dystopian land of Brotherland undertaken by Meiji- the only remaining girl, in a female less nation and her guardian Youngest in a bid to escape the authoritarian control of the dystopian patriarchal society run by the



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despotic ruler the General. Sowmya Rajendran and Manjula Padmanabhan present two very different India in their dystopian novels. Both the texts critique and foreground many pertinent feminist and socio-political issues endemic to India. The Indian society presented in these texts is dystopian and have many characteristics traits associated with dystopias. The present study aims to study the depiction of India in both texts specifically its depiction as dystopian.

Dystopia means a bad place (*Dystopia*, Claeys 4). Dystopian fiction is futuristic and is a warning to its readers (Booker, "Literature and Dystopia" 177). Dystopia and utopia both employ satire to foreground and criticise some existing unhealthy social trends in the contemporary world ("Utopias and Dystopias" 416-417). A society regarded as dystopian is easily identifiable by its lack of freedom to its citizens, unjust social order, lack of privacy due to the constant surveillance, unhappy state of existence of its citizens, authoritarian rule (Claeys, "Three Variants on the Concept of Dystopia"). Dystopian fiction with feminist concerns became a major form in the 1980s with the publication of texts such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Native Tongue* (1984), *The Judas Rose* (1987). The discussion and emphasis of feminist concerns with a dystopian setting gave rise to the subgenre of feminist dystopias. The existing gender relations are often exaggerated in such dystopias (Cavalcanti 53). It features a society divided on gender lines and women in such societies are underprivileged by the virtue of their gender (Cavalcanti 49). Writers writing in the genre of feminist dystopias have grappled with important feminist concerns like reproductive rights, domestic violence, female infanticide, and female foeticide in such fiction.

The present problems of female infanticide, violence towards women and related women's issues have influenced writers Manjula Padmanabhan and Sowmya Rajendran to envision a dystopia set in future India which is dystopian for women. Dystopian India presented in their novels have issues like female infanticide, moral policing, rape, control of women's sexuality and reproductive rights which makes them nightmarish for women. Both present societies divided on gender lines where women have to bear the brunt of moral codes. Both of their texts can be categorised as feminist dystopias. The article looks at two depictions of India by two women Indian English dystopian writers namely Manjula Padmanabhan and Sowmya Rajendran. The presentation of dystopian India is analysed by criteria about the judgement of the dystopian genre. Authorial intention, context, reader's interpretation of the text and content analysis are the



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main criteria followed for categorising a text as dystopian (*Dystopia*, Claeys 290). The critique of issues, the treatment of social-political issues and the presentation of it all come under the ambit of authorial intention and context. The content analysis involves unearthing the themes and motifs commonly associated with dystopian society texts such as the degree of authoritarianism, sexual repressiveness, use of propaganda, the punishment to citizens who disobey the rules. The literary techniques used in the presentation of dystopian India are also analysed. Each of the motifs, issues and literary techniques discussed in the article also shows how disadvantaged women are in both societies which make it a feminist dystopia. All this is intertwined with the reader/ interpreter's interpretation of the text which is the third criterion. Both the texts are set in India. This criterion is used to study the presentation of dystopian India in both texts.

Defamiliarization and in media's res – Literary Techniques in Dystopia

The main technique followed in the novel in the presentation of dystopian India is defamiliarization (Booker, "The Turn to Dystopia in Modern Literature" 3). This technique allows to bring in a new outlook on the issue (Booker, "The Turn" 3). The novel *The Lesson* takes on a real-world issue like rape and sets in a future India where rape is considered as a just punishment for women considered errant and wayward. The author uses one of the most regressive justifications offered for rape by its perpetrators: teaching a lesson to women who anger or transgress the perpetrators dictates. The novel begins with the rapist reviewing petitions and applications of candidates who are to be raped by him. There is no explanation given as to reasons and incidents for the present dystopian state. The novel follows the practice of in media res and begins the action in the middle of the plot without any expositions, which is a common technique used in dystopian fiction (Moylan 148). The novel *Escape* features a land where women have no worth and are exterminated because of it. The novel shows the reader what would be a society without women and how would its men fare in such a place and time. The author by employing the defamiliarization technique is showing us the problems of female foeticide which helps the reader to view this problem in a new light and take it seriously. The novel opens with suitors arriving for Meiji and her guardians getting rid of them. The plight of the dystopian country or its inhabitants is not given as the novel begins. The novel begins with suitors begging to catch a glimpse of Meiji. The novel follows the technique of in media res associated with dystopian literature. A background of Meiji, her guardians and the dystopian land is not



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given and the novel begins right at the time when the guardians decide to review potential suitors who would take care of Meiji.

Escape and The Lesson as Critique of India's Gender Problems

Authorial intention and context matter in the categorisation of dystopian fiction (Claeys, *Dystopia* 290). Many of the current social and political problems are satirised and critiqued in dystopian fiction (Booker, "English Dystopian Satire in Context" 33). The author opines that many of the existing laws in India exercise control over women and their body in covert ways and that she has simply articulated these views through the presentation of the Adjustment Bureau – a government ministry that codifies gender roles for women ("Sowmya Rajendran on 'The Lesson' we teach women"). The author satirises government schemes concerning women which sees them only as reproductive units ("Sowmya Rajendran"). The issue of marital rape also finds a place in the novel. Marital rape is not punishable as per the Indian Penal Code and the author regards it as an issue that needs discussion and deliberation ("Sowmya Rajendran"). The author started writing this book in 2013 when the Nirbhaya rape incident happened and she was also influenced by this happening ("The Horror Within"). The novel is a larger critique not only on rape but also the rape culture which normalises and perpetuates it. She also wants to critique the social perception of the rape survivors as dishonoured and shamed women and wants to champion women who are brave rape survivors ("The Horror Within"). Manjula Padmanabhan's novel is written in response to the authors' concern for the declining female population which made her imagine a scenario without women ("Q&A with Manjula Padmanabhan").

Female Infanticide and Foeticide

The preference for male children has contributed to female foeticide in dystopian India presented in *The Lesson*. The preference for male children is due to the role of male children as caretakers and the dowry given to men in times of marriage. The dystopian country has a rule that only parents of girl children can make compulsory financial investments for their age-old needs. Parents of male children are expected to be taken care of by their offspring and they are not allowed to make any financial plans. The author here is indicating the age-old sexist notion of allowing only the male children as parents' caretakers and not their daughters. This practice also dismisses the fact that female children can also have jobs and be financially independent to take care of their parents. An incident of female foeticide is revealed in the text



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Vol.7, No.2, June, 2022

when the youngest daughter corrects the eldest daughter saying that her firstborn was not a son indicating that the eldest daughter had committed abortion of her firstborn- a girl child. The dupatta regulator's insistence on male children made him force his wife to commit an abortion. He also recommends the doctor who committed abortions for his wife to his sister-in-law to "get rid of trouble before it actually begins to trouble you" (Rajendran, *The Lesson*) indicating his open dislike for girl children.

In *Escape* intense hatred towards women by the totalitarian regime results in the mass killing of all women and girls. Padmanabhan has constructed an alternative dystopian India where there are no women. Women are dragged from their houses and killed by a mob. The ones harbouring women are also attacked, killed and maimed. Even years after the establishment of the dystopian country Brotherland, women and young girls are still found routinely in the estates of some families. Such women are executed publicly to instil fear in the minds of the populace. The author wrote *Escape* in the context of fears of dwindling sex ratio and the novel is an articulation of her fears. Feminist Dystopias provides exaggerated realities and gender relations. The feminist dystopia of *Escape* shows a country devoid of any males. The present fear of dwindling sex ratio is exaggerated in this text to showcase a world where the domination towards women is legitimised and their existence outlawed. The novel shows how the rest of the citizens survive without women and the long-term repercussions of such a scenario through the genre of dystopia. Many men in this dystopian country miss their mothers, wives or daughters but are not free to express this or harbour them. Some of them like Windseeker prefer only natural means of reproduction without the assistance of artificial means provided by the totalitarian regime. Due to this reason, some families and lineages prefer to go extinct rather than carry their legacy. The author has painted a bleak picture for the remaining men in Brotherland in their life without women which she suggests would also be the result for India if issues like declining sex ratio, female foeticide and infanticide are not remedied.

Rape

Instances of rape are provided in both the dystopian presentations of India in the texts. *The Lesson* has a wider discussion of rape and its implications. The title "The Lesson" itself refers to rape – a lesson taught to errant women. The perpetrators of rape often have a reason that it was meant to teach a lesson to the victim. The novel takes on a real-world excuse/ reason used by the rapist and sets this in a world where this reason is considered legitimate. Even though in real-world rape is considered a heinous crime and not



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Vol. 7, No. 2, June, 2022

justifiable by any means, the novel turns this around by setting this in a dystopian setup where this crime is accepted and even used as a lesson. The technique of defamiliarization ensures that rape as an offence is perceived at the level of the rapist; the regressive and misogynistic thinking underling it. Rape culture is so normalised in the novel that it becomes part of the government's official policy. The rapist's job in the novel is a government job where he has to do nothing other than to rape women who have flouted rules from the conduct book.

In *Escape* when the gendercide of women begins the women who stand up to the abuse were ritually raped or stoned to death. Rape is regarded as an assertion of power and domination over women and a way to silence them into submission.

Punitive Society

Dystopian societies are not tolerant of free-thinking rebels who question the established dystopian order and try to suppress them (Mohr 9). The dystopian order wants its citizens to follow its rules and regulations without any critical thinking and questioning. The suppression of individuality is a consequence of such policing (Claeys, "News from Somewhere" 162, 172). The presentation of India in both the texts is that of a punitive and surveillance society which constantly monitors and fines and punishes its citizens for any rule-breaking. Women bear the brunt of this policing in the presentation of India in both the dystopian texts.

India presented in *The Lesson* is one in which both men and women have to follow strict codes mentioned in a codebook. The ones who break the rules face the ire of the Adjustment Bureau and the moral police. The Adjustment Bureau sends memos to individuals who have reached a marriageable age and have not yet married. The moral police arrest and reprimands individuals who flout the rules in the codebooks. Activities such as pre-marital sex, dalliances, watching porn, or any activity considered licentious are not allowed and those found engaging in this are punished. Moral police inspected the citizens and reported and arrested anyone found flouting the rules. The society presented is a surveillance state where moral policemen, as well as the overly morally conscious citizens, also pry into other individual's life to know whether they are flouting the codes in the conduct book. The dupatta regulator in the university whose job is to report girls who improperly wear dupatta always kept an eye on the girl students wherever he went. Couples who engaged in love affairs had to do it discreetly because of the fear



of moral police. It was a punitive society that always kept an eye out for citizens who flouted its rules and punished them.

Dystopian future India in *Escape* is a punitive society that punishes individuals who disobey the dictates and rules of the totalitarian regime. Dissent is not encouraged in any form and individuals have to strictly obey the rules without questioning. All minor and major revolts are suppressed by the authoritarian government. There is strict control over the dissemination of information as any past literature can lead to free-thinking and rebellious ideas which may foster dissent. In the nascent stages of the establishment of the dystopian order those that cooperated with the authorities were rewarded with safe supplies such as food and water in a radioactively poisoned wasteland that the Brotherland has become. Those who pledged their alliance with the regime were also rewarded with estates and drone making facilities. While there are rewards for those who aided and cooperated with the regime there are also strict penalties and punishment for those who flouted the rules. The estates or households found harbouring women are deprived of their material possessions as a punishment.

Authoritarianism

Dystopia became a major form as critique of collectivism and totalitarian and despotic tendencies. Even though the latter-day dystopian fiction has evolved in its core concerns the element of authoritarian control whether be it by a party, an alien race or by technology is a common element in much dystopian fiction (Claeys, "Three Variants" 17).

The Lesson presents us with an authoritarian Adjustment Bureau with its codified rules for men and women. It impinges on the fundamental rights of men and women by prescribing for them suitable age for marriage, forcing them to get married and have kids, and punishing them for activities considered licentious. It encouraged marriages and discouraged divorces at the cost of mental health and happiness. The divorce is granted by the Adjustment Bureau and their dictum is that women have to adjust to their partners irrespective of their incompatibility with their partner. The divorce procedure is long, complicated and meant to ensure that women remain married. The Adjustment Bureau and its president have authoritarian tendencies and control aspects of an individual's life which are clearly in the private sphere. It denies them the freedom to take important life decisions and imposes their viewpoint onto them.



The authoritarian ruler in dystopian India in *Escape* is the General who rules the country along with his clone brothers. There is no democracy in Brotherland. Dystopian India is characterised by an authoritarian ruler and its personnel who suppress all dissent and impose their ideas onto the population. The General, the head of the dystopian order instituted himself in power with violent strategies such as using explosive nuclear weapons, harassing and killing people who oppose him, releasing cement bacterium, a bioweapon, to destroy anything built of cement. The borders of the country are closed and no movement is permitted to the country as well from it.

Sexually Repressive Society

Dystopian society has a strict and authoritarian stance towards sexuality. Sexual relations are one aspect of an individual's life in which the authoritarian regime exercises its control (Sargent and Sargisson 305). Both the novels present future India as a society where sexual freedom is limited by authoritarian control. In both these feminist dystopias, a woman's sexuality is regarded as dangerous and something to be controlled.

All pre-marital sexual relations are banned in the dystopian country in *The Lesson*. Sex was regarded as necessary to produce children but the Adjustment Bureau condemns sex outside marriage. Even the moral policeman's son is not exempt from the repercussions when he impregnates a girl after having sex with her. He is shipped off to a distant city to live with his cousin and the girl's foetus is aborted.

In future India, in *Escape*, this control manifests as the control and abolishment of sexual relations between men and women. Women's sexuality is regarded as dangerous and begetting future offspring which are inferior to the artificially produced offspring invented by the new regime. The dystopian regime believes that the reproduction done naturally is a great risk as the offspring thus produced may be degenerate due to the involvement of female inferior gene. The mass killing of women has to do with the fears of the regime about the eventual degeneracy of future inhabitants. The General who is the totalitarian ruler believes that there are great dangers involved in sexual relations between men and women resulting in degenerate offspring which will threaten the prosperity and longevity of the nation. For this reason, he wants to abolish all sexual relations between men and women which he achieves by killing all women.



Reproductive Rights

Women's reproductive rights are limited and controlled in both feminist dystopias. The control of a woman's reproductive rights is a motif in many feminist dystopias like *The Handmaid's Tale*. In *The Lesson*, women are seen as reproductive units whose duty is to produce children as soon as possible after marriage. The president encouraged couples to produce children in the first year of marriage itself and he was also considering making this suggestion into law. Those like the youngest daughter who has no interest in begetting a child is scorned in such a society.

Escape features a dystopian India where a woman's natural means of reproduction was not needed and it was replaced with artificial means which made use of animals' blood. The creation of artificial means of reproduction allowed men to create children in their image and character without the presence and use of women. It is to also prevent the "contamination of dual parentage" (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 73) as the General claims it, that the artificial means of reproduction was invented. Women were eliminated in Brotherland after the invention of this technology as the General claimed there was nothing else to justify their existence. The dystopian order viewed women as nothing more than as wombs for producing babies.

Conclusion

There are many points of similarity in the depictions of India in both texts. India is depicted as a place with unequal sexual relations where women are underprivileged and men occupy a position of power. The Indian society shown in both the texts are sexually repressive, authoritarian, features gender crimes such as female foeticide and rape. The visions of both the writers present India as a feminist dystopia where existing unequal relations and power play between men and women are exaggerated to show a world unfavourable to women. Besides being a feminist dystopia, the texts depict India as dystopian for all its inhabitants, not just women too, as it subscribes to many of the common motifs, characteristics and themes associated with dystopias.



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Vol. 7, No. 2, June, 2022

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