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Nationhood, Space and Critical Dystopia in Contemporary India: Reading Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and Sowmya Rajendran's *The Lesson*

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Abstract: This article examines Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) and Sowmya Rajendran's *The Lesson* (2015) as examples of critical dystopias that interrogate constructions of nationhood. It analyzes how both texts depict nationhood through the systemic marginalization of female bodies across public and private spaces. The cultural and spatial (re)production of the nation is first situated within the patriarchal structures of the nation-state. The article then explores how familial spaces, though considered apolitical, are significant sites for internalizing, reproducing, and sometimes subverting patriarchal ideologies. The narratives are then contextualized within the contemporary socio-political climate of India. The recent rape and murder at a prestigious medical college in Kolkata serves as a central point of reference. In doing so, the article underscores the urgent relevance of feminist critical dystopian fiction in the Indian context. The analysis draws on theoretical frameworks concerning nationhood, family, and critical dystopia.

Keywords: nationhood, familial spaces, critical dystopia, contemporary Indian society, resistance

Introduction

On August 9, 2024, a thirty-one-year-old doctor was raped and murdered within the premises of a renowned medical college and hospital in Kolkata. The incident caused nationwide protests, drawing attention to India's ongoing challenges, including "high [number of] rape cases" and "low conviction rates" (Patel). It brought to the national consciousness two crucial facts: that the crime occurred in the workplace, and that the perpetrator was part of that same work environment. This has raised pertinent questions regarding space and the female body in the Indian context. Aside from the emotional response, this article seeks to examine the questions of space and the body in relation to women, and to demonstrate how they have always been a part of Indian dystopian fiction. What is remarkable is that these questions were already raised nearly a decade ago

by women writers like Manjula Padmanabhan and Sowmya Rajendran, who reflect the current reality of India.

Notably, a comparative study Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and Sowmya Rajendran's *The Lesson* within the framework of dystopian fiction has already been done (Babu, T.K 51). The present analysis will read these novels as critical dystopias with a special focus on the depiction of the public and familial spaces within the nation-state. The genre of critical dystopia intersects totalitarian repression with the "utopian impulse" of resistance. Unlike traditional dystopias that culminate in the individual's subjugation, critical dystopia "opens a space of contestation and [collective] opposition" (Moylan and Baccolini 7). By analyzing the intersection between dystopian and utopian elements, the question of space and body within the dystopian nation-state will be first investigated. This will lead the inquiry into the impacts of the violent nation-state on familial spaces, which become sites of oppression and resistance. The article will then interrelate the novels with the narratives of protest that emerged around the aforementioned crime against a Kolkata doctor—hereafter referred to as the Abhaya case. The protests will be interpreted in terms of their "utopian impulse." The point of this discourse is to reflect on dystopian fiction by Indian women writers as a picture of the contemporary reality for women in India.

Strange Corporeality within Spaces of Nation-State

This section explores how *Escape* and *The Lesson* can be analyzed as critiques of India as a nation-state and as counter-narratives to its self-image as a free democracy. A "nation" is a "social grouping" shaped by shared traits such as race, language, history and other factors, while a "state" is "an autonomous political structure over a specific territory" (Rejai and Elnoe 143). A nation-state is formed when "the boundaries of the state are approximately coterminous with those of the nation" (143). Sara Ahmed, like many scholars, contends that the very idea of the nation is inherently exclusionary (Ahmed 16). The nation is shaped not only by state institutions but also through everyday encounters in public life. These practices involve drawing boundaries between those who belong and those who are considered outsiders or "strangers" (16). Ahmed posits that "strangers are not simply those who are not known in the dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, already recognised as not belonging, as being out of place" (20). In other words, certain bodies are marked as "strangers" by their presence in spaces imagined as not including them. In *Escape* and *The Lesson*, public

spaces, whether a university or a city street, are constructed to exclude women. In these narratives, this exclusion is reinforced by the way executive leaders abuse their power, legislators misallocate resources, and judicial bodies uphold patriarchal norms.

Notably, in the narratives examined, the creation of exclusionary spaces is evident in the allocation of technological resources, usually governed by the legislature in India. In the narratives, technology serves as a tool of exploitation rather than empowerment. In *Escape*, the dystopian regime believes that women can be replaced by advanced technology. Arguably, such depiction of technological usage subverts its normative association with progress and safety. In contrast, *The Lesson* foregrounds violence through the absence of technological resources. Rajendran satirically introduces the “dupatta regulator,” ostensibly introduced for women’s ‘safety’ in lieu of effective measures such as CCTV surveillance, security personnel, safe transport, or self-defense training—deemed too expensive (41). While *Escape* eliminates the subject to be protected, *The Lesson* shifts the burden of protection onto women themselves. Together, these narratives expose how state policies and resource allocation are shaped by entrenched patriarchal logic.

Moreover, the nation-state in both narratives is marked by the misuse of executive power by figures who claim ideological and nationalistic motives. In *Escape*, the General asserts his vision of a better nation while committing acts of extreme violence. After killing a surviving woman, he boasts that he “snuff[s] her out” by “snap[ping] her neck clean” (56). This language implies a disturbing satisfaction in asserting dominance. Similarly, in *The Lesson*, the “moral police” surveils a couple becoming intimate, deliberately waiting “to see how far they would go” before intervening (13). He kisses and gropes the girl to punish her for being physically intimate outside marriage. This suggests that when a woman deviates from socially ascribed moral boundaries, violence against her body becomes socially legitimized. That the “moral police” waits for the couple’s transgression before intervening reflects a personalized abuse of power, disguised as the preservation of ‘national tradition.’ Such portrayals in both narratives may be read as a literary critique of the authoritarian tendencies within executive institutions. These tendencies especially become visible when nationalistic or moral imperatives are used to justify violence and control. The irony embedded in both narratives thus functions as a sharp commentary on the hypocrisy and corruption prevalent within certain forms of governance.

It is pertinent to note that in *Escape*, the judicial system is suspended completely given its totalitarian structure, which erases all recourse to justice. In *The Lesson*, the patriarchal bias in the judiciary is critically depicted. This can be evinced through Rajendran's protagonist, the "second daughter," who is denied legal divorce from her abusive husband and told to "adjust" instead (8). This suggests that women are expected to suppress personal desires to uphold patriarchal institutions like marriage and motherhood, which are perceived as essential to Indian tradition.

Furthermore, the texts reveal how the patriarchal nation-state manipulates the media, the so-called 'fourth pillar of democracy.' In *Escape*, technological communication is nearly absent to suppress dissent. The General monopolizes media for propaganda and declares: "The longer I stay on the air, the greater the audience for my message"—the message that women are 'redundant' in the age of technology (90). This unidirectional control over media suppresses voices of opposition and of the marginalized. *The Lesson* goes a step further by depicting direct media-government collusion. The character referred to as the "media mogul," head of the news channel *Good News*, states: "People are blank slates... It is for the likes of us, who work for the government, to fill them up with what they need to know" (39). Here, media is a tool of manipulation, not transparency. The President of the Adjustment Bureau collaborates with the "media mogul" to stage "The Lesson," a televised rape of the "second daughter" designed to intimidate rebellious women. It parallels real-life instances where sexual abuse is often manipulated by those in power to further their political agenda. While *Escape* erases marginalized subjects from media, *The Lesson* weaponizes female visibility to reinforce the patriarchal ideology of the nation-state.

Additionally, both narratives depict women attempting to assert their identity in public spaces, only to be constrained by gendered norms imposed on their bodies. In *Escape*, Meiji must wear a prosthetic penis to conceal her gender in a world where women are exterminated. The masculinization of Meiji's female body signifies that the public space is constructed as belonging exclusively to the male body. Similarly, in *The Lesson* women are required to hide their female bodies to move in public spaces. In *The Lesson*, the satire lies in placing the "dupatta regulator" at a university—an institution of empowerment—to police women's clothing and prevent rape. In both examples, the attempts by women to claim the public sphere are

undermined by bodily regulations. This renders women as what Sara Ahmed terms “strangers” in the public domain.

Hence, the nation-state in both narratives emerges as a patriarchal entity that is inherently exclusionary of women. The structures of the nation-state—legislative, executive, judiciary, and media—function not as instruments of empowerment but as tools of control over women’s bodies. This reinforces the patriarchal foundations of the nation-state. Thus, the narratives examined, by employing the dystopian set-up, foreground the failure of democracy in the Indian context.

The Legacy of Violence in Familial Spaces

This section examines, through the narratives, how the family becomes a site that simultaneously perpetuates and resists the patriarchal nation-state. Christopher Lasch challenges the notion of the family as a harmonious unit, emphasizing the inherent conflicts within it (Lasch 53). This article acknowledges the innate tensions present in familial spaces. It also reconsiders Talcott Parsons’s view (qtd. in Lasch) that the nuclear family, by offering warmth and autonomy, prepares the child to face a hostile world (53). The examined narratives reveal the intrinsic ambiguity of familial spaces, which function both as sites of agency and as instruments of control.

The novels illuminate how a hostile nation-state colludes with familial spaces to perpetuate generational violence against women. In *Escape*, Meiji’s mother died protecting her daughter from the violent, totalitarian Generals. Ironically, in sacrificing herself, the mother may be seen as inadvertently helping to sustain the patriarchal nation—one that remains uninhabitable for her daughter. This is evidenced by Meiji’s seclusion, imposed to prevent her from the violent gaze of men. Similarly, in *The Lesson*, the mother of the “second daughter” is denied the right to marry her chosen partner by her father. After being forced into another marriage, she is also refused a divorce by the state. Her desire is thus suppressed by both her family and the state. Consequently, she reproduces this violence by enforcing marriage upon her daughters, perpetuating the legacy of patriarchal control.

Furthermore, in the narratives examined, the violation of the protagonists’ bodies by family members disrupts the notion of family as a safe space. In *Escape*, in order to replenish their armory and further their journey, Meiji and Youngest travel to an estate owned by the brute Swan. Before entering the estate, Youngest temporarily paralyzes Meiji and disguises her as a blind boy to conceal her gender. He does this, seemingly, to

protect her from Swan's sexual advances. Here, Youngest's purportedly protective actions transmute into control, blurring the boundary between paternal protection and domination. Swan later sexually assaults Meiji after discovering that she is a woman. As a result, Meiji declares, "I'll cut off... my horn-things," referring to her breasts, implying bodily shame and self-hatred. In *The Lesson*, the "second daughter" is raped by her husband within the supposed safety of her home. Consequently, she falls into a "stupor" where she "couldn't see him or anything else in the room" (64). This indicates a disconnection from her own body in the face of violence. In both instances, the protagonists are alienated from their bodies due to violence inflicted upon them within their familial spaces. Thus, rather than empowering women, the family here contributes to their fragmented sense of self.

Significantly, in the narratives, ambiguous familial bonds offer agency to the protagonists within the dystopian nation-state. In *Escape*, Meiji's strained relationship with Youngest also becomes a source of hope. Youngest informs Meiji about a place beyond the dystopian nation-state where women live in safety, vowing to take her there. This knowledge empowers Meiji to reclaim agency over her body and embrace her identity. This is suggested in the scene where she touches her body to explore and understand it rather than reject it—earlier she wished to mutilate her body. Similarly, in *The Lesson*, the protagonist draws strength from her fraught relationship with her mother. The administration decrees rape as punishment for the "second daughter" after she seeks a divorce from her abusive husband and rejects motherhood. The mother counsels the "second daughter" to stoically accept the punishment and "play along" for survival (149). The insistence on survival over resistance against the administration suggests complicity. Yet, the mother's affectionate revelation—"If we fall to pieces now, how is she going to survive this?" (149)—is significant. It enables the daughter to face her punishment as reflected in her thought: "She felt stronger than she ever felt since the beginning of this ordeal" (150). Thus, the daughters in both novels gain renewed strength while sharing a complicated bond with their parents.

Furthermore, the family members, especially the parental figures, become instrumental in resisting the oppressive nation-state in the narratives. In *Escape*, Youngest's endeavour to help Meiji flee the dystopian land may be interpreted as a form of resistance. This opposition is to a nation-state that kills women to create a patriarchal world. In *The Lesson*, the protagonist's parents initiate a candlelight march against the

administration's punishment of the "second daughter." Arguably, the administration's perpetuation of gender-based violence serves as a critique of Indian policies, which inadvertently benefit the perpetrator over the victim. In standing against the nation-state, family becomes a medium through which national policies can be challenged. Thus, familial spaces and relationships hold potential to foster individual agency and limited political subversion.

Women in India and the Nation as Critical Dystopia

This section analyzes the Abhaya case to show how Indian critical dystopias anticipate contemporary Indian realities. The various modes of resistance with reference to the case are analyzed and paralleled with the "utopian impulse" of Moylan's "critical dystopia" (7). The concept of critical dystopia is based on dystopian fiction produced after the 1980s (7). This article extrapolates the concept to understand Indian dystopian writings in the Indian context. Among its defining features, the narrative of resistance is particularly significant, as it sustains the "utopian impulse" within dystopian narratives. Although dystopia is commonly associated with a literary genre, Gregory Claeys avoids conflating the noun *dystopia* with dystopian literature. For Claeys, "the adjective dystopian implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail" (17). His emphasis on the "non-literary empirical usage of the term" (17) is germane to the analysis of the Abhaya case in this article. The case may be read as a real-world manifestation of dystopia, exposing entrenched patriarchal ideology and signaling a dire future.

Essentially, the sexual assault and homicide of a doctor within the presumed safety of educational and professional spaces disrupted the normative fabric of Indian everyday life. The transformation of a professional environment into a dystopian one reflected multiple systemic failures. It indicated institutional inefficacy, indifference and the administration's patriarchal outlook. According to different news outlets, there were lapses in the hospital's security, including inadequately used CCTV cameras (Bhattacharya and Kumari). The state government also suggested that women doctors avoid working at night (ANI)—a solution that reinforces patriarchal forces. These instances parallel the satirical portrayals of institutional incompetence rooted in patriarchal thought-processes, as explored in the narratives discussed above.

Significantly, against this real-life dystopian terror, utopian hope emerged as nation-wide protests unfolded in response to the Abhaya case. Under the slogan "Reclaim the Night," the protestors challenged

institutional corruption and demanded safer workplaces for women and medical professionals. These protests emerged as a powerful counter-narrative to systemic violence before being manipulated for various political agendas. This evokes the 2012 Nirbhaya rape and murder, which elicited a similar nation-wide furor. These crimes and the subsequent response of resistance led to several judicial reforms, such as the introduction of the Aparajita Bill in 2024 and the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013. Yet, such incidents continue to occur at frequent intervals, suggesting a continued legacy of violence across the Indian landscape.

Notably, the narratives discussed in the preceding sections suggest not only changes in national policies but also the necessity of mobilizing families and communities. In reality, most gender-based violence usually occur within domestic spaces. Media attention and policies tend to overlook this, as is evident in both Abhaya and Nirbhaya cases. Families can be both a source of violence and support. They can act as first responders by providing safe spaces for disclosure, comfort, and legal or medical support. State interventions lose effectiveness when families value 'honour' over justice or silence survivors. Progressive laws mean little without change within families and communities.

Initiatives such as Mumbai-based NGO SNEHA's family-centered domestic violence program work to raise awareness and mobilize the community to support victims of sexual violence (Nayreen Daruwalla et al. 2). Kerala's *Jagratha Samithi* also engages directly with the community and holds local law authorities accountable in relation to gender-based violence. Such NGOs are capable of addressing violence against women otherwise overlooked by media outlets and even local authorities. Thus, to ensure long-term improvements in women's safety, efforts must go beyond legal measures and infrastructure. Real change also depends on working within families and communities. Support systems for survivors, educational workshops on gender issues, and awareness efforts should be made part of everyday domestic life. This can help shift families from silent bystanders to active supporters of women's rights and safety.

Conclusion

Fatima Vieira posits, "[w]e know the change we desperately need can only happen with everyone's participation. Change cannot come from above, nor from below, but from both sides, indeed from many sides, resulting from many utopian strategies put in place simultaneously" (331). This multi-pronged approach to change is evident in the critical dystopias of Rajendran and Padmanabhan discussed above. In *Escape*, Meiji's

family and forces involving the United Nations, the underground resistance, and feminists outside the dystopian border, engage in dismantling the totalitarian regime of the Generals (Padmanabhan 390–391). This illustrates the importance of resistance both from within and without—by those closer to power and by those farther removed from it. In *The Lesson*, the “moral police,” a government employee who had previously worked for the dystopian government, participates in the protest against the violence inflicted on the “second daughter.” This suggests that both Padmanabhan and Rajendran foreground the necessity of resistance from multiple fronts against the dystopian elements of the nation-state. In the Indian context, meaningful change may arise not only from shifts in national policy but also through active engagement within families and communities. In the future, significant and lasting change will require efforts on multiple fronts. This includes not only legal reforms and improvements in education, but also stronger involvement from local communities and continued support from NGOs. Crucially, such efforts must aim to prevent violence against girls, especially those often overlooked. This means tackling cultural norms and creating change at both the systemic and policy levels, rather than reacting only after harm has occurred.

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