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Resistance Ecologies: Interlocking Power Struggle among Rulers, Subjects, and Drones in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*

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Abstract

This article investigates how power and resistance play out in Manjula Padmanabhan's Escape (2008) between authoritarian Generals and their people and among the oppressed, considering human-drone hierarchies. The study examines important characters—Meiji, her uncles, and the drones—and finds that resistance manifests as overt disobedience, covert subversion, and intra-group conflict. While Youngest and Meiji's escape indicates tactical resistance, their privileged position raises concerns about the underprivileged who remain behind. The drones' paradoxical autonomy undermines traditional power dynamics by demonstrating posthuman agency within oppressive systems. The study contends that Escape deconstructs binary notions of oppressor and oppressed, instead portraying resistance as cyclical and intrinsically unstable. This study combines feminist perspectives, Foucault's biopower, and contemporary theories to provide a sociopolitical reading of Padmanabhan's apocalyptic narrative.
Keywords: Manjula Padmanabhan, Escape, Resistance, Dystopia, Power

Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) depicts a terrifying dystopian future in which a patriarchal, phallogocentric regime has brutally exterminated women. In this world, the protagonist Meiji—the only surviving female—is protected by her three uncles: the Elder, the Middle, and the Youngest. The Youngest Uncle's quest to find other universes where women may still exist acts as a narrative catalyst and a symbolic act of defiance to the authoritarian erasure of women, showing the enduring human need to envisage possibilities beyond institutional control. While most critical responses to *Escape* have framed it as a dystopian narrative (Patwa, Chakraborty, Babu), this paper contends that the novel's value rests in its nuanced analysis of resistance as a political tactic for freedom. This study illuminates the novel's tripartite resistance dynamics by interrogating specific textual instances: (1) the vertical conflict between the ruling apparatus and its subjects, (2) the horizontal tensions among the subjugated themselves

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(exemplified by the uncles' divergent ideologies), and (3) the latent opposition embedded in the drone-master hierarchy, where mechanized subalterns challenge their oppressors. Through this three-dimensional lens, the study demonstrates how Padmanabhan's work goes beyond traditional dystopian themes to investigate the fundamental dynamics of authority, survival, and rebellion. This relates to broader discussions on gendered oppression, state violence, and daily protest methods in dystopian regimes. Jameson's theory of everyday resistance unveils the inherent paradox in resistance, stating that while covert acts of dissent preserve the appearance of conformity to prevailing systems, they also subvert them subtly, thereby creating both public legitimacy and latent challenges to hegemony (57). De Certeau defines this as tactical resistance, which involves employing improvised, informal methods to use the system's mechanisms against it (25). Collectively, these theorists demonstrate how everyday resistance functions through two narratives: one that upholds the prominence of the dominant order, while another steadily undermines its pillars. The uncles' meticulously crafted duality serves as an embodiment of this theoretical paradigm. They use their official positions to subvert the gender order by their covert acts (sheltering Meiji, looking for escape routes), which is de Certeau's tactical subversion (25). From saving Meiji's life to organizing her interworld escape, this clandestine rebellion builds throughout the narrative, illustrating Jameson's finding that routine actions can become systemic problems (57). Importantly, their opposition is purposefully non-aggressive, enabling the Generals to "maintain control of the public stage" (Jameson 57) while subtly undermining the symbolic authority of the regime.

While Jameson and Certeau emphasize resistance tactics, Scott's "public transcript" concept draws on the spatial distinction in their performance vis-a-vis experience. He asserts that oppressed populations cultivate private dissent while exhibiting surface-level conformity, thus positing seemingly ordinary citizens in negotiation with power-vested administration. Moreover, public performatives of those in power are intended to be impressive, confirm and normalize dominant elites' dominance, and cover or euphemize the dirty linen of their rule (Scott 18). Youngest and his brothers' outward compliance, which includes upholding the Dronery Estate and publicly adhering to the Generals' laws, conforms to such an act of public transcript. However, the hidden transcript reflects discourse—gestures, speech, and practices—that are typically left out of subordinates' public transcripts due to the exercise of power (18). While Youngest and his brothers raise a girl, educate her, and then eventually plan and execute her escape, though covertly letting the Generals imagine that all is well in their world. The dynamics of public and hidden transcripts become apparent late in the text, where Pigeon, Bamboo, and Blackson conform publicly in Swan's presence, but use a hidden transcript while addressing Youngest. Seeing Youngest as one of their own, they openly recount Swan's abuses at the estate. Thus, the existing studies have conveniently conceptualized resistance in binary terms, overlooking the possibilities of a nuanced negotiation between the two ends.

This article acknowledges Lilja's departure from this binary framework by proposing a tripartite resistance model. She classifies resistance into three categories: avoidance, breaking, and constructive. Avoidance is a covert technique in which people avoid persecution without explicitly recognizing their behaviors as resistance (qtd. in Lilja 209). It manifests in the uncles' covert preservation of Meiji, hiding her in their estate while maintaining an outward facade of loyalty to the Generals, thus evading detection. Breaking involves a more direct approach, questioning authority through non-cooperation, disobedience, or outright interference (Lilja

210). It gets exemplified through Youngest's murders of Swan, the drone manufacturer, directly challenging the regime's economic infrastructure. It is followed by the drones' retaliation by killing Pigeon, avenging their master Swan's murder. They cremate his body, giving proper burial rights, and thus violating their programmed obedience. Finally, constructive refers to weakening authority by enacting alternatives through new practices, performances, and social constructions (cited in Lilja 211; Koefoed 39). This emerges through the uncles' plan to transport Meiji to another world, leading to Meiji's self-reinvention as "Bird," redefining identity beyond state control. Padmanabhan, however, complicates Lilja's model by revealing the fluidity between these categories: the uncles' initial avoidance escalates into breaking, while the drones' rebellion lacks constructive agency, underscoring resistance's human dimension. Ultimately, the novel critiques the fragility of freedom, as even constructive acts (like inter-world escape) remain aspirational under despotism.

Resistance so far is understood as a unilateral struggle between the oppressed and the power structures. However, this study contends that it occurs in three interconnected dimensions: (1) rulers resisting dissent through preemptive suppression, (2) the oppressed opposing domination, and (3) the oppressed (including non-human drones) withsetting each other due to competing visions of liberation or mutual distrust. By studying these processes in Padmanabhan's *Escape*—from the Generals' suppression of opposition to the common public's action, Youngest and his brothers' covert action (such as saving any woman, or moving out of the city), and Meiji's fight with her protectors; the study calls into question the oppressor–oppressed binary. Instead, it displays resistance as a contested terrain where power is constantly renegotiated.

Literature Review

Padmanabhan's *Escape* has been critically explored via various theoretical lenses, revealing its multifaceted critique of female inequity, institutional brutality, and technological dehumanization in modern India. Basu and Tripathi (2023) investigate how *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* challenge traditional womanhood by changing gender identity in a dystopian, posthuman world, while ignoring the novel's social implications of revolution. Chakraborty's (2020) takes a more structural approach, framing *Escape* as a protest against India's gendered violence, citing empirical figures from the 2011 census (914 females for 1000 males) and the UN's "missing girls" phenomenon. Babu and Pius (2018) apply Foucault's subjectivity theory to Brotherland's inhabitants, revealing how power constructs docile bodies—an analysis that could be extended to the drones' programmed obedience. The subversive potential of the everyday resistance portrayed in the novel is also understated in Babu's 2017 research on panoptic monitoring, which assesses the regime's disciplinary measures.

While previous research has usefully studied *Escape's* gender and power dynamics through feminist and Foucauldian lenses, three crucial gaps remain unfulfilled. First, earlier research has overlooked the novel's tripartite model, which includes rulers, subjects, and drones; a framework fundamental to this paper's examination of multidirectional power struggles. Second, they do not investigate in depth how technology acts as both an oppressive tool (by surveillance drones) and a site of rebellion (via the drones' eventual insurrection). Third, complex interclass tensions among the oppressed, particularly between human subjects and automated laborers, are understudied. This study fills these gaps by combining feminist critiques of gendered violence, Foucauldian analyses of biopower, and resistance theories to

provide a comprehensive sociopolitical reading of Padmanabhan's dystopia.

Resistance between the rulers and the ruled

When utopian ideals are coercively imposed, they usually divide communities into benefactors and victims, creating what Atchison and Shames call the "dream for some, nightmare for others" dichotomy (7). This dynamic is particularly evident in authoritarian regimes, as systemic subjugation incites revolt from the oppressed while also instilling paranoia among rulers frightened of uprising. Padmanabhan's *Escape* crystallizes this tension through its depiction of the Forbidden Country, a misogynist dystopia in which Generals rule "Brotherland" after exterminating all women, classified as "vermin," under the WWU's isolationist policies (Navarro-Tejero). Meiji, the novel's protagonist, survives, thanks to her uncles' protection, while Youngest's arduous mission of transporting her to another world represents opposition to the regime's biopolitical order. Padmanabhan's novel demonstrates how authoritarian utopias eventually elicit multidirectional protest: from those attempting to maintain power (the Generals) and those battling for existence (Meiji's family).

The Generals' totalitarian authority in *Escape* embodies Foucault's concept of "biopower"—a government paradigm that imposes control over both individual bodies and entire communities. As a result of a particular historical trajectory, the Generals have created a society in which women are systematically eliminated, deemed obsolete by the dual forces of drone labor and artificial reproductive technology. This gendercide is exacerbated by the Boyz, a military police force that executes severe laws by public executions, while "Dynamic Surveillance Teams" (351) ensure panoptic control. The regime's totalizing ideology extends to the elimination of autonomy and memory. Transportation, education, and even printed materials such as books and magazines, particularly those hinting at sexuality, are banned. Youngest's charge sums up the Generals' aim of epistemic violence that they (generals) "should have been called erasers" (120), for not just killing people but also the mere evidence of their existence, "cancell[ing] out" geography and history. In doing so, Padmanabhan challenges how authoritarian governments use historiography and technology as weapons to create a complacent, ahistorical public. *Escape* further institutionalizes harsh patriarchal authority by systematically eliminating women who are judged physiologically inferior and designated as the "Vermin Tribe." This gendercide notion uses biological engineering to replace natural reproduction with male cloning. It also exploits technology substitution via domestic drones, effectively removing women's conventional societal roles. Within this authoritarian framework in which female presence is a death violation, the three brothers (Eldest, Middle, and Youngest) engage in multifaceted acts of resistance by secretly raising their niece Meiji. Their subversion operates on multiple levels, including physically supporting unlawful female existence and epistemologically perpetuating prohibited education. Additionally, it expands geographically, with the audacious act of plotting an inter-world escape.

While the Generals have established a stable society based on fear and terror, they are nevertheless always afraid of being overthrown. Paranoia, a persistent fear of rebellion, prevents them from trusting even their closest supporters. Their connection with the three brothers—Eldest, Middle, and Youngest—who run the Dronery Estate, a crucial center of technology and the economy in Brotherland, serves as an example. The brothers continue to be viewed with mistrust despite their cooperation with the dictatorship throughout the systematic

extermination of women and their continued public support of the Generals' decrees. This mistrust is shown when a clone General replies bluntly to their claim that they support the Generals, "I don't want to believe that you are [lying] – yet I do!" (Padmanabhan 73), when inspecting the Estate. Even after Meiji's mother burned herself to death to save her daughter in order to give the Generals the idea that there is no remaining female in their family, they continue to distrust them. The General's visit to this well-known Estate is a calculated action; it acknowledges that its operators have the means and clout to perhaps oppose or even flee the regime's rule. Although the General's suspicion of the Estate's hidden danger turns out to be correct, his inability to see the danger at hand highlights the instability of authoritarian control, where a culture of constant suspicion eventually erodes the regime's unity.

Padmanabhan portrays the name as a vital site of resistance to the Generals' authoritarian rule, which uses nominal erasure as a "technology of power" (Foucault 194). The state's implementation of annual name lists, where "all names must come only from that list" (Padmanabhan 103), exhibits what Jameson calls totalitarianism's "radical effacement of historicity" (156). It turns identification into an instrument of control. However, the text challenges this repression through actions of notional reclamation. Meiji's retention of her "pet name," despite its absence from state-sanctioned listings, exemplifies Foucault's "insurrection of subjugated knowledge" (81)—a silent defiance that preserves selfhood against bureaucratic erasure. During Meiji and Youngest's escape, this opposition gets more intense, and naming becomes an active liberation tactic. Butler's idea of discursive resistance by "framing the nameable" (137) is in line with Youngest's instruction to Meiji to "think of a new name" (103) and preferring himself to be called "Red" rather than "uncle" in public, turns nominal choice from a forbidden act into a tactical reclaiming of agency. The novel uses avian symbolism to connect nominal reinvention and actual flight, establishing self-naming as a metaphor and a means of escape. Padmanabhan eventually views the naming as a multifaceted act of resistance to authoritarian control that operates across three interrelated registers: epistemological, performative, and collective. Meiji's use of her "pet name" exemplifies epistemic resistance—a clandestine preservation of illegal personal history that defies the Generals' institutional erasure. The adoption of "Bird" and "Red" during their escape shows performative resistance, in which self-reinvention through naming enacts freedom outside the state's legible categories. Finally, fugitives' everyday naming rituals foster collective resistance, resulting in counter-histories that defy institutional forgetfulness.

The State's rulers, who call themselves "Generals," have named themselves and everything around them. Padmanabhan strategically uses the general's names for the rulers because they hold power over their citizens, just as a general usually holds power in the Indian army. Women were barred from combat duties in the Indian Army when this text was written, a reality that Padmanabhan transfers to her dystopian universe by exaggerating the eradicating of women from society. In this world, the Generals wield total control, presiding over a land in which women are almost extinct. Meiji's existence (as the only female survivor) is a literal defiance of the Generals' biopolitical "eradication", positing a threat to their position. To underscore the shortage of women, the text briefly references Meiji's mother and a few others who remain outside the city and have little contact with the Generals. However, even within this bleak order, resistance persists while survival becomes a counter-force. Furthermore, a contradiction is created by the Generals' reliance on cloning and drones to replace women. While they can

regulate reproduction and work through drones, Youngest and Meiji's escape challenges their authority, revealing that absolute power is inevitably broken by opposing forces of defiance.

Resistance among Subjects (including drones)

Dystopian nations are regularly disrupted not just by outright rebellion, but also by the quiet perseverance of people who resist complete surrender. *Escape* demonstrates how people in a dystopian world strive to deal with their problems by finding modest ways to avoid being controlled and make their own choices. Meiji, a little girl in the care of her uncle, Youngest, gradually realizes the depth of his influence over her life. She considers his authority, stating he is "the one who makes the rules... just like a General" (Padmanabhan 203). Her comparison compares familial control to military command, stressing her sense of powerlessness. Meiji compares herself to a puppet, saying, "So if you (Youngest) want to talk, we talk. If you do not wish to talk, we don't talk. It has nothing to do with me." (Padmanabhan 204). This sense of dominance emphasizes her awareness of the inequality in their connection. Despite her reliance on him, Meiji begins to assert herself, realizing that the only way to resist is to engage in emotional and psychological violence. This shift disturbs Youngest, who is "amazed that she had the nerve to resist him even when she was so completely in his power," a reaction that "annoyed and hurt him" (Padmanabhan 204). Meiji's defiance, albeit subtle, represents a significant challenge to the control that defines their environment, demonstrating the survival of agency even inside dominant systems and amongst subjects. The conflict between Youngest's protective intentions and Meiji's impression of manipulation exemplifies the complicated power dynamics that underpin acts of disobedience under authoritarian governments. Meiji's sculptural metaphor, "You've been shaping my life...eliminating portions of it without informing me" (Padmanabhan 121), articulates what Foucault calls the "insidious leniencies" of paternalistic control (*Discipline* 138), in which protection becomes indistinguishable from domination. Her reference to a marble sculpture whose excised shards cannot be restored emphasizes her irreversible loss of self and the severe fissures in her identity. The metaphor depicts how systematic violence leaves lasting scars, ripping away elements of her being that can never be restored.

Padmanabhan further addresses the ethical complexities of survival methods and the effects of tyrannical power. The Generals, who wield ultimate authority, remake their world with "the force of their will," changing natural landscapes, demolishing cities, and rebuilding civilization to fit their vision. They rationalize their acts as benefiting the world while systematically excluding and eliminating specific groups from society. Similarly, Youngest and his brothers believe their attempts to defend Meiji are morally justified. However, Middle's more thoughtful posture presents a critical conflict, as he observes, "When she [Meiji] understands what we have done by bringing her into a world that denies her the right to exist, she will not be grateful" (Padmanabhan 53). This realization undermines the brothers' sense of righteousness by emphasizing the ethical uncertainties inherent in their conduct. The conflict between their protective intentions and the results of their acts reflects the Generals' authoritarian reasoning, whose vision of progress is also repressive. By juxtaposing these disparate yet interconnected beliefs, Padmanabhan explores the moral ramifications of imposing personal standards in an exclusionary world.

The analysis till this point reveals that resistance operates bidirectionally—a) between the

Generals and Meiji's family, and b) among subjects competing for similar objectives, between Meiji and Youngest. Thus, Padmanabhan's narrative overlooks the experience of ordinary citizens in this society, focusing instead on Meiji's privileged position as a member of an affluent family capable of orchestrating escape. This selective perspective leaves the plight of those without the means or power to contemplate resistance unexamined, creating a significant gap in the text's representation of societal exploitation. The ordinary citizens neither have their voice within the narrative nor are they allowed the faculty to resist. This point is further elaborated with the fact that Meiji is the only girl who survives while all the others are brutally exterminated from their world. Meanwhile, Youngest and his brothers possess an assertive voice throughout the text. Minor characters like Bamboo, Pigeon, and Blackson have no voices. The brutal killing of Pigeon by drones happened just because he accompanied Youngest in his ideas of taking over Swan's Estate, and paid the price for the same. This shows the dependent condition of ordinary citizens in Padmanabhan's dystopian world, who have neither a voice nor the means to resist. They are either being used by their master, Swan, or by their so-called accomplice, Youngest. This shows that the universality of resistance is missing from Padmanabhan's novel, highlighting not a weakness but a specific intervention in the dystopian tradition, where resistance is depicted as accessible only to those who can afford it.

The hierarchy of resistance that reflects human power dynamics is further complicated in *Escape* through the drone-human encounters. The drones, which Swan reductively dubbed Tail, Beak, and Job, initially seem obedient but eventually take control. Following Swan's murder, the drones ostentatiously embrace Youngest's rule while remaining loyal to their deceased lord. This deceit leads to their planned murder of Pigeon at Bone's command, a brutal act of retaliation that reveals their covert allegiance, echoing Braidotti's "posthuman paradox," in which artificial beings form resistance and tribal allegiances (98). A deeper emotional and cognitive awareness is shown by their non-compliance, which is manifested in acts of deliberate brutality and manipulation, such as Bone killing Meiji's puppy or putting sexual magazines beneath her bed. This tension is even heightened by individuals such as Pigeon and Blackson, who seek vengeance against drones for Swan's prior torture. Pigeon's call for drone extermination— "I don't mean just on this estate, I mean everywhere" (Padmanabhan 261)—is reminiscent of the Generals' genocidal assault against women. The drones' possessing human-like agency through Bone's vengeful actions and simultaneously properly cremating their master shows they possess short-term memory and emotional awareness. On the other hand, Blackson and Pigeon's vengeful instincts mimic the cruelty they detest. These cyclical resistance dynamics, in which makers become targets of their products, blur the line between man and machine. The drones' evolution from mere tools to autonomous agents highlights the novel's fundamental paradox that excessive control system eventually creates their own opposition.

Conclusion

Through this study of Padmanabhan's dystopian fiction *Escape*, the paper highlights that resistance unfolds across three interconnected ways: (a) where rulers suppress dissent before it grows, (b) the oppressed challenge domination, and (c) when the subjects (including non-human drones) turn against one another. The paper identifies the lack of universalities of resistance, where resistance is only afforded to those holding privileged positions, such as Meiji and her family. At the same time, ordinary citizens like Pigeon, Bamboo, and Blackson do not have

any voice within the narrative, nor are they allowed the capability to resist. This study not only broadens Lilja's tripartite model of resistance by placing it in dystopian circumstances but also demonstrates how such tales complicate and expand our understanding of power struggles. It extends the discourse on resistance through the fluid positionality of the rulers, the oppressed, and subjects. The paper adds more depth to Padmanabhan's studies and dystopian literature by providing an alternative framework of tripartite resistance, man-to-machine interaction, and posthuman technology to conduct further research.

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