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## Feminist Science Fiction as a Postcolonial Paradigm

*Esterino Adami*

The future is in your hands, she resumed. She held her own hands out to us, the ancient gesture that was both an offering and an invitation, to come forward, into an embrace, an acceptance. In your hands, she said, looking down at her own hands as if they had given her the idea. But there was nothing in them. They were empty. It was our hands that were supposed to be full, of the future; which could be held but not seen.  
Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

The relation between science fiction and postcolonial literature has rarely turned out to be fully productive, given a certain reluctance of postcolonial writers to deal with imaginary scenarios and futuristic issues. In India, for instance, science fiction as well as fantasy are often disregarded as marginal, childish sub-genres unsuitable for adult readerships, and they have hardly reached visibility on the mainstream literary scene, apart from a few exceptions, like *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) by Amitav Ghosh, a novel that grafts Victorian exotic themes with pseudo-scientific explorations in the darkest areas of medicine<sup>1</sup>. However, Manjula Padmanabhan is an author who challenges such constraints and provokingly appropriates and re-elaborates genres and styles, motifs and references. In her writing the categories of science fiction, feminism and postcoloniality become overlapping contingencies. The novel *Escape* (2008)<sup>2</sup> is a dazzling story set in a dystopian India, a decayed country under embargo, (almost) totally bereft of women, in which a caste of self-cloning Generals brutally rule. Three brothers, Eldest, Middle and Youngest, secretly look after Meiji, a young girl, but when the conditions of the regime further worsen, they decide that she has to flee the country and Youngest organises the risky mission. The novel, ambitiously, condenses a variety of themes through the satirical power of science fiction, shedding light not only

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning Indian literature in English, we could also cite writers such as Samit Basu, Vandana Singh and Priya Sarakkai Chabria, but it is also worth mentioning a recent anthology of authors of sci-fi stories from other postcolonial contexts, collected in Nalo Hopkins and Uppinder Mehan, ed., *So Long Been Dreaming. Postcolonial Visions of the Future*, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Manjula Padmanabhan, *Escape*, Picador India, New Delhi, 2008. All quotations in brackets with abbreviation *E* and page reference are from this edition.

on the of frail position of women in postcolonial settings, but also extending the gaze onto the preoccupations of ecocriticism, body representation and textuality. In this paper I shall focus on this novel, integrating my analysis of Padmanabhan's feminist postcolonial science fiction with references to her play *Harvest*<sup>3</sup>, originally written and premiered at the Teatro Texnis, in Athens in 1997, and then published in book-format in 2003, which pivots around the ghastly sale of human organs, transplanted from postcolonial individuals and sold to the well-off people of the west.

As a whole, *Escape* belong to a particular type of sci-fi, namely dystopia or anti-utopia, a hypothetical future society, eclipsed by dark powers at the detriment of human life. Until recently, this genre seemed to be associated mainly with male authors, from George Orwell's *1984* to *When the Sleeper Awakes* by H. G. Wells, from Russian novelist Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* to *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, but female literary contributions in different times and contexts have enriched the field, offering a revisitation of models and values as well as insights into the dimension of womanhood. Feminist science fiction does not simply represent a form of alternative divertissement in the light of its complex relations with other cultural spheres, but its position of in-betweenness constitutes a stronghold of discussion and in Jenny Wolmark's opinion "it exists in contradictory relationship to the hegemonic discourses to which it is opposed but on which it draws, and this is the reason for its oppositional capacity to open up new spaces for alternative representations of gender"<sup>4</sup>. The relevance of female sci-fi writing, furthermore, acquires deeper meanings when we take into account writers from English-speaking contexts like Padmanabhan, Margaret Atwood or Doris Lessing, who to some extent share postcolonial features and in whose texts we are shown a critical gaze onto the subaltern categories of both women and postcolonial subjects, represented and reconstructed against the oblivion imposed by patriarchal/colonial order into the structures of affabulation.

In *Escape*, the typical elements drawn from dystopian fiction are at work: we observe a perishing, post-apocalyptic country governed by a dictatorial regime of Generals, who have conceived and realised the extermination of what they call the "vermin tribe", i.e. the female gender, whereas a few dissidents – such as the brothers Eldest, Middle, Youngest – try to contrast this delirious vision. The three opt for sending away the girl they have clandestinely raised. The perilous trip to the outer world eventually becomes a quest for identity bringing to light unsolved questions and doubts. The author moreover discusses the transformation of human bodies, as in the case of Meiji's puberty, but also the idea of assembling or deconstructing artificial or "fictional" bodies, for example by imagining pseudo-human drones, an army of identity-less slaves used by the

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<sup>3</sup> Manjula Padmanabhan, *Harvest*, Aurora Metro Press, London, 2003. All quotations in brackets with abbreviation *H* and page reference are from this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York, 1994, pp. 24-5.

Generals. The commodification of bodies or parts of bodies is of paramount importance in *Harvest* too, as organ sales are organised with “surgical” preciseness in a cold and disdainful tone that turns “second-class” Indians into a mere “repository” of spare parts for the well-off sick and elderly of the west.

The recourse to the darker sides of dystopian imagination is a device that allows Padmanabhan to criticise and expose the segregation, marginalisation and, in the worst cases, physical annihilation of women in India today. In the novel, the mad project of gender cleansing is carried out by the class of military rulers, who keep cloning themselves in the attempt to establish a multiple entity able to reproduce and recreate controllable and indistinguishable individuals and identities. What underlies this despotic plan ultimately regards the suppression of the female power of generating and perpetuating life. During an interview with a foreign journalist, a General explains in sheer terms this hallucinating vision: “Female are driven by biological imperatives that lead them to compete for breeding rights. Whereas collectives breed cooperatively. In order to control breeding technology and to establish the collective ethic we had to eliminate females” (*E*, 271). Such quotation operates on two distinctive levels: on the one hand, it evokes the classic sci-fi theme of eradication of individuality in favour of an identity-less and dehumanised wholeness, devoid of selfhood and conscience, whilst on the other, it dramatises the treatment of women, when they are considered nearly a burden in Indian society given their liminal position. The Generals’ obsession, indeed, translates in fictional terms a subterranean tendency of old-fashioned traditional families to raise boys instead of girls, with the consequence that infanticides and selective abortions, often to avoid dowry arrangements, are dramatically common in certain rural areas of the Indian subcontinent<sup>5</sup>.

Padmanabhan does not address such loaded issue directly, but she prefers to interweave a series of references and analogies under the disguise of an unsettling world that falls apart without the mediating position of women. In particular, the gist of female identity is staged in the confusion of Meiji, whose developing body manifests the epiphany of biological course, as well as in the interstices of memory, in spite of the androcentric revision that the Generals have imposed even on the linguistic sphere. When Youngest and Meiji set for the outside world, the man understands that the transformation of the girl, who gradually shifts from childhood into adolescence, will soon start and radically change their lives: “to his eyes, she was a child still. He could not discern any changes in her, though it had been a month now that he had stopped her hormone-suppressants” (*E*, 165). In order to keep their secrets, however, the physical appearance of the girl has to be hidden through a

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<sup>5</sup> The crucial theme of women physical repression and their relative “extinction” is also tackled in a controversial shocking film *Matrubhoomi: a Nation without Women*, directed by Manish Jha in 2003. Here, in the incipit a voiceover warns the audience that “Thousands of baby girls are either aborted or drowned at birth every day in India. Dowry is the cause. Where will this crime lead us to?”.

kind of masquerade. To put a female body out of sight in a male-dominated context also means to metamorphose identity and selfhood: Meiji clumsily has to wear men's clothes and play the role of a boy, although she is fully unaware of gender differences and body morphologies. From a feminist perspective, such phase of bewilderment mirrors the efforts of female identity to grow and develop freely: for the girl, going through various stages of alteration and adaptation is a necessary process leading to a fuller consciousness of her belonging to womanhood, a self-exploration of her own identity. The escape towards freedom accelerates her growth in a contradictory manner so that Meiji has often mood swings, but she still wants to play her games. However, her body, which symbolically also functions as a cultural site through which new hopes for a better world are inscribed against patriarchal hierarchies, betrays the irruption of immutable nature.

As the author wisely balances the thematic architecture of the novel with well defined critical orientations, we could argue that, to some extent, this story can be read within a framework of gynocritics, a category that in Elaine Showalter's view "begins at the point when we [women] free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture"<sup>6</sup>. Indeed the sci-fi context, a logic system built on rational "alternate history" that strives to reproduce and reorganise reality, offers Manjula Padmanabhan the chance to experiment an "ongoing" female viewpoint, followed through two fundamental ages such as childhood and adolescence, set to blossom into a more aware perception of life. Meiji has to reconstruct her "natural" way of holding a female identity, matched with the sense of motherhood: the futuristic India that the novelist depicts has substituted the biological child-bearing capacity of women to generate life with cloning techniques, through which the Generals, their reckless acolytes (who are emphatically called the Boys and reminiscent of *Mad Max*-like riders), and the numb drones – a sort of bio-robots at the base of the hierarchical social pyramid – and the other inhabitants perpetuate their flat existence.

The issue of sexual reproduction and birth control is not an uncommon motif in dystopia literature: it informs for example the narrative pattern of Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937) in which women are "employed" exclusively for the biological perpetuation of future generations. In Padmanabhan's oeuvre, however, the allegiance of sci-fi and feminism is further elaborated through a postcolonial viewpoint, evoking in particular the contemporary condition of women in the countries where patriarchal traditions impose practices of marginalisation, abuse or even execution. In its allegorical and hyperbolic style, this variety of feminist science fiction – the texts by Padmanabhan *in primis* – permits to reflect on the denial of female identity, which fractures

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics" in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism*, Virago Press, London, 1986, p. 131.

the meaning of the role of the life-giver too, thus performing a kind of “sacrilege” against life and its natural course, maybe even against God or other superior notions or .

The question of the mothering role arises also in *The Children of Men* by P. D. James (1992), which portrays a gloomily skewered world in the new millennium when women have lost their fertility and manhood is said to be doomed. Recording his diary in 2021, the narrator Theodore Faron, an Oxford scholar, recalls the void and fragility of perishing life, but when he joins a group of dissidents of the regime – represented by the self-proclaimed Warden of England – his life will radically change since a woman of the group turns out to be inexplicably pregnant. Apparently the story does not subscribe to a feminist vision, but when a baby girl is born after decades of global sterility, the protagonist acknowledges the crucial ritual of life being generated by a woman: “the primitive act, at which he was both participant and spectator, isolated them in a limbo of time in which nothing mattered, nothing was real except the mother and her child’s dark painful journey from the secret life of the womb to the light of day”<sup>7</sup>. In *Escape* a similar feeling of sweet tenderness, a celebration of human life being generated and perpetuated is recalled by Youngest when he talks about Meiji’s mother: ““You grew within a loving mother, a woman who adored you with every breath you took – you were beloved and blessed through all the nine months of your gestation and when you were born it was as if the sun had entered all our lives” (*E*, 387). If contemporary genetics identifies in some unknown African Eve the very source of human development, the Indian writer highlights the primary role of women for the perpetuation of life, even in an aseptic anti-utopia like the one realized by the Generals. Meiji, therefore, becomes not only the last representative of the female gender, but also the bearer of future hopes, the mother of future generations.

In cultural and anthropological terms, we could argue that the child-bearing power of women pertains to the aura of sacredness, and in the Hindu tradition, goddesses and mythical women are crucial figures reminiscent of the conflicting positioning of women in society: they are powerful and glorious, like wild, ferocious Kali, but at the same time they have to come to terms with the restrictions imposed by androcentricity, as in the story of Parvati pleasing Shiva. In Padmanabhan’s writing, the old memory of womanhood endures in fragmented forms when people strive to remember how, in the “Time Before”, women were massacred by the dictatorial technocracy determined to redraw the socio-political picture of the entire country. The scene in the following quotation, that a man tells Youngest, iconographically describes how a woman who is about to be killed seems to perform a kind of mythical sacrifice, which constitutes a manifestation of primitive might, springing from within,

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<sup>7</sup> P. D. James, *The Children of Men*, Faber and Faber, London, 2005 (1992), p. 262.

“But his grown female was beyond my wildest imagining. I see her now as clearly as she was then. A huge figure, broad at the shoulders and broad at the hips with a rounded, generous belly. [...] When the soldiers held her with her arms pinned back she raised up her lower body with a demonic energy and spread her slit wide all to see – and I see it now in my mind’s eye as a great scarlet gorge, ringed with writhing black serpents, flames shooting from it, blinding all who looked within – as she screamed, ‘Fools! Fools’ even as they ran her through with their blades. She was still roaring and triumphant as she died”’. (*E*, 258-9)

The author seems to suggest that the crimes of the regime hit not only individuals, but in the end erase cultural consciousness and societal belonging, paving the way to an autocratic restructuring of life foundations. Once again, the creativity and malleability of literary forms in science fiction permits to denounce and dramatise old postcolonial preoccupations, like the subalternity of women and their progressive silencing through the forms of speculative fantasy.

But the writer further expands the central motif of femininity when she draws an analogy between woman and nature, introducing an ecocritical perspective as well. Both are capable of maintaining and spreading life in all its shapes, and yet at the same time they are both in danger due to insensitive politics. In the text, we learn that dystopic India has been drastically transformed into a bleak scenery, after the storage of nuclear waste coming from the west and the fatal atomic bombing ordered by the Generals to “solve” the problem of overpopulation. The consequence is that now the country is largely covered by a huge, radioactive area, emblematically called the “Waste”, inhabitable and neglected. Derived from a well-established sci-fi tradition of catastrophic and apocalyptic literature, such uncontrolled abundance of pollution, a key term also in postcolonial discourse given its loaded discriminating parallelism with “impurity” pertaining to castes, widowhood, or other types of prescription, morbidly devastates the biosphere as the novelist works out a point of view that “emphasises environmental justice to a far greater degree than deep ecology. The logic of domination is implicated in discrimination and oppression on grounds of race, sexual orientation and class as well as species and gender”<sup>8</sup>. The trope of contamination and pollution once again evokes a sick society devoid not only of women, but also of solidarity and equity, therefore unable to consider life in its ontological essence and flow.

In the novel, the concept of “generating” – i.e. giving or reproducing life – is now artificially reconstructed in laboratories that manufacture hordes of catatonic servants. If much contemporary science fiction exploits the thematic relevance of androids, cyborgs and robots, Padmanabhan more subtly recurs to what she labels “drones”, a cloned army of semi-mute “designated labour species, subhuman and incapable of self-generating” (*E*, 270). Built, assembled and tested in special

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<sup>8</sup> Greg Garrad, *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 26.

licensed laboratories called “droneries”, they are a sort of obedient slaves that see to tedious jobs in their capacity of working units. On a metalinguistic level, it is interesting to notice how the term drone problematises the notion of male supremacy in a system that strives to survive by replacing the laws of nature with technologised androcentric autarchy. What characterises such dystopia, in the end, regards a sense of moral, physical and environmental sterility, whereby life is brutalised into the mechanical construction and genetic cloning of soulless bodies. The droning process is actually a type of self-centred placebo that endorses the mass murder of women and the accurate homologation of individuals since, as a General states, “uniqueness and individual talents belong to the past: today we can duplicate and standardize anyone, anything” (*E*, 64). However, during their secret journey Youngest and Meiji experience how a dronery can also become a tumultuous location when, unexpectedly, a drone uprising challenges the order of things. When the vicious owner of a dronery dies, his creations bemoan the death of their maker and the event seems to testify not only a form of schizophrenia, but also an attempt to return to human values, inscribed in history and tradition: “the fact is, they cremated him in what I can only describe as an elaborate ritual. I would not have thought they were capable of it had I not seen it with my own eyes” (*E*, 289).

The violent rage against women aimed at their complete extinction is balanced with a more spread plan of identity control: in this nightmarish state, people live in settlements called estates and each area is governed by a General whereas many satellite-connected cameras are in operation. The Generals themselves have given up their sense of individuality, and in their multiple cloned nature they represent a kind of plural, polyphonic entity, a biotechnological version of Leviathan, the monster that Thomas Hobbes used as a metaphor for the political body of the nation, but which today can assume a polymorphous aspect, as a stratification of technologies, sciences, knowledge, infrastructures via the hybridisations of the postmodern age. The fascinating narration highlights how a General is constantly linked to his “clone-brothers, gene-mates” (*E*, 33). In their opaque lack of personal identity, these fierce rulers make up a messy and sometimes contradictory power, which the clever writing of Padmanabhan, also oscillating between the tones of non-sense and humour, denounces as a monolithic instance of dictatorship. I would like to quote some meaningful excerpts from the interview a General gives to a female journalist from the outer world as it displays the collective nature of the despots and their blind vision of life,

Interviewer: When you talk to one another, how do you differentiate yourselves?

General: We don't need to. We are connected via the jaw-phone embeds.

Interviewer: The -?



General: Tranceivers permanently embedded in our jaws. When one of us talks, all hear. We think as one. (*E*, 92)

[...]

Interviewer: What about death? What happens when one of you dies?

General: We're identical. One more or one less – what does it matter? When one drops out, there's always another to take his place. (*E*, 147)

[...]

Interviewer: So you deny there's anything amiss in your world.

General: What we say is the only truth. (*E*, 318)

The fragmentation and manipulation of identity, a process that dissolves the sense of wholeness and recurs in much sci-fi literature, for example in several of Philip Dick's novels, is here instrumental in building up a corroded world, whose rituals of power display a certain amount of schizophrenia and insanity. The plural and dehumanised voice of the Generals, who consider themselves as “sculptors” of reality and want to “erase history, geography, whole generations of people” (*E*, 125), viz. the idea itself of life, actually functions as a contrapuntal element in opposition to the viewpoint of Meiji, who asks herself the very basic question “who am I?” when she starts a difficult self-making process.

The interplay between science fiction and postcoloniality emerges in the treatment of the bodies exploited by the cannibalistic attitude of the west prevailing over the east. The postcolonial, in a way “alien”, body is appropriated and recycled for the benefit of the dominant classes<sup>9</sup>. In *Escape* bodies are objectified and made reproducible through cloning or chemical processes, but it is in the play *Harvest* that the author sinisterly questions the integrity of the body against the unfair palimpsest of power relations: bringing to light the contemporary “scandalous” issue of organ selling is aimed at pointing out the various forms of exploitation and slavery that still today affects the conditions of life in many postcolonial contexts. In the play, Om, a young man from a humble, Bombay-based family, decides to sacrifice himself as a donor for Ginni and Virgil a pair of wealthy North American receivers, and therefore his body becomes a type of commodity which undergoes a process of marketisation by means of the perverse forces of postmodern consumerism. Indeed, the

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<sup>9</sup> The metaphor of the postcolonial body staged as an alien body can be also identified in a recent SF film, directed and written by Neil Blomkamp and Terri Tatchel titled *District 9* (2009), which shows a weakened extraterrestrial population, forced to live in a purposely built slum in South Africa. Their squalid ghetto becomes a sad reminder of refugee and detention camps that western countries often employ to “manage” the flows of migrants. The film also speculates about the hybridisation of bodies and races, and its potential commercial exploitation, because when the protagonist Wikus van der Merwe starts an irreversible process of mutation into an alien body, multinational and military forces understand that he is the only one who can use the extraterrestrial lethal weapons. They want to use him as a guinea pig for cruel experiments, and this again demonstrates how the dignity of the body and the respect for all, in this case also non-human, living beings is remorselessly mortified.

inexistent chances for social improvement and upward mobility convince the protagonist to passively accept the dreadful contract, envisaged by an unfair global condition “where the rich have licenses to hunt socially disadvantaged types” (*H*, 62). Accurately balancing the tones of funny black comedy and chilling macabre dystopia, the author updates the tradition of mad scientists operating and transplanting human bodies – i.e. the Frankensteins of our technological era – from a postcolonial standpoint, which denounces again the patronising and unscrupulous depletion, constantly operated by western multinational corporations at the expense of remote, underdeveloped territories. In thus doing, the author deftly renders parodic the notion of technoscape, namely “the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high even at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries”<sup>10</sup>.

Such radical act of criticism is disguised under the dim imaginary of disturbing sci-fi, and towards the end of the play, the confrontation between Jaya, Om’s life, and Virgil, the receiver who has never appeared, climaxes with unsettling nuances as the girl discovers that it is the body of Jeetu – Om’s brother – that has been used in the planned operation. The episode is worth quoting at length,

Jaya: I don’t know what to believe!

Virgil. We look for young men’s bodies to live in and young women’s bodies in which to sow their children.

Jaya: What about your own!

Virgil: We lost the art of having children.

Jaya: How can I be?

Virgil: We began to live longer and longer. And healthier each generation. And more demanding... soon there was competition between one generation and the next – old against young, parent against child. We older ones had the advantage of experience. We prevailed. But our victory was bitter. We secured Paradise at the cost of birds and flowers, bees and snake! So we designed this programme. We support poorer sections of the world, while gaining fresh bodies for ourselves.

Jaya: And it works? You live forever?

Virgil: Not everyone can take it. We fixed the car, but not the driver! I’m one of the stubborn ones. This is my fourth body in fifty years. (*H*, 86)

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<sup>10</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 34

Here, beyond the futuristic version of the old myth of immortality lies a condemnation of a certain world order that bisects the global scene into exploiting and exploited territories and communities, revitalising a kind of neo-colonialism grounded upon the unjust distribution of wealth, sources, means. The hypocritical reference to developmental aid schemes actually expresses the selfish nature of rapacious, oligarchic policy, one which silently takes advantage of liminal subjects, marginalised women, postcolonial individuals.

The issue of organ-selling in *Harvest* and the idea of drone cloning in *Escape* – as well as several other elements in both texts – pivot on the notion of body as malleable matter, which scientists and technicians can section, study, and reproduce as biological or artificial fuel for the future (wealthy) generations. The operation of composing bodies, identities, texts, themes constitutes a powerful metaphor of creativity and metamorphoses that the writer applies to the modality of science fiction, grafted on a postcolonial vision. Her target is not only the deconstruction and reconstruction of bodies, but also the investigation of identity and its constant anxieties. To fight the dictatorial regime oppressing the devastated nation and allow her personality to develop, Meiji must take a path of self-detection and interrogate her female role in an androcentric society, in a nutshell the meaning of being and becoming a woman. It is a double type of relationship because she has to consider inner and outer relations, and from a sociological perspective we ought to remember that “the nature of self-identity can also be seen to be bipolar, that is to have a sense of self is also to have a sense of not-self, of those who are different – the other”<sup>11</sup>. In the case of Meiji the other is represented in ambiguous terms because she is used to living with men (her uncles), but she paradoxically ignores the existence of women, the gender to which she belongs. Therefore, both masculinity and femininity represent the other for her. As her body starts to change during puberty, she has to renegotiate her embodied self, discarding the ventriloquist childish games of the past with some imaginary friends, and wondering about the gender relations of the Time Before, in the light of biological and psychological growth and urges.

When the man and the girl reach a nameless city, she unwillingly accepts to get dressed up as a boy to avoid rousing suspicions, but when she sees a group of feminine drones at the service of a rich man, probably a parodic version of hijras, we observe how her crisis and dismay reflect a disproportion of identity: Meiji gradually understands that she would like her femininity to show, and yet she has to cope with a restriction of identity. In considering herself a *monstrum*, a mutant like “the bird with four wings, the fish with ten tails” (*E*, 387), she even accuses Youngest and his two brothers to have kept her on the estate as a form of what in feminist theory could be labelled as “chauvinist entertainment”, a pleasurable novelty: “How can anyone want to live like this, always

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Hill, James Watson, Danny Rivers & Mark Joyce, *Key Themes in Interpersonal Communication*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, Berkshire, 2007, p. 48.

hiding, always terrified, your little captive freak?" (*E*, 387). However, if the author wishes to raise consciousness about the present condition of women and challenge patriarchal law by metaphorically gives birth to a "new" girl, a "new" text, she also proves to be not entrenched in ideological positions. She certainly sides with Marleen Barr's interpretation of speculative fiction as a "powerful educational tool which uses exaggeration to make women's lack of power visible and discussable"<sup>12</sup>, but her postcolonial feminism aims at a larger revision of societal roles and functions of both men and women, with a more inclusive approach towards subjugated subjects. If traditionally women in India are marginalised and excluded from social contexts, Padmanabhan responds with a young character who represents the future architect of a new epoch, in which women are acknowledged their vital role in the world.

If we collocate *Escape* in the feminist sci-fi canon, we see that it stands diametrically in antithesis to novels like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and Lessing's *The Cleft* (2007) since it orchestrates as its very core the absence of women, and therefore substantiates a journey of exploration and questioning of a male-dominated elsewhere. Both *Herland* and *The Cleft*, on the contrary, suggest the notion of an all-female unconventional world, built in a utopian self-contained structure. The impossible world conceived by Gilman turns out to be not a "Woman land" or "Woman country" because women are not represented as a counterpart of male roles, but a site of revision for models, clichés and ideas, often through the strategy of irony and parody, for example when the male explorers want to approach the inhabitants of Herland offering them colourful necklaces, a sort of fetishised baits. Doris Lessing's starting point, expressed in the prologue of her plot-less novel, is in the hypothesis that the basic human living stock was probable female and therefore she imagines an all-women community, in between a feminist provocation and an anthropological fable, that is fecundated by the moon or the sea – like in the ancient cosmogological myths. But when the women – called Clefts – start giving life to "anomalous" creatures, the males who are defined "monsters" or "squirts" and who are so different from them, this bizarre Eden will commence its decline and fall, unable to meditate rapid changes: "Males, females. New words, new people"<sup>13</sup>.

In Padmanabhan's futuristic fable, the relationship between genders is essentially reconstructed via the power of language that puts together the fragments of the past: the few rare people who still remember the female presence call them "wi-men", viz. "a race distinct from men" (*E*, 255), and Meiji herself seems to be unable to accept Youngest's explanation and thus wonders "whether or not I've become a monster yet" (*E*, 326). The Generals have ordered the complete eradication and relative outlawing of the concept of womanhood, even at linguistic level so that

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<sup>12</sup> Marleen S. Barr, *Alien to Femininity*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1987, p. XX.

<sup>13</sup> Doris Lessing, *The Cleft*, Harper Perennial, London, 2008 (2007), p. 13.

pronouns like “she” or “her” have become useless anachronisms, but somehow it still survives in secrecy, although for the girl it is often source of doubts and displacement. This is also evident in her in-progress idiolect, which reflects not only the process of language acquisition accompanying the phases of growth, but also a great effort to reshape her notions and knowledge of the world. But only when she learns the language of woman, she will be able to comprehend her entire identity. As to language, the author appears to combine both feminist and postcolonial strategies since the female and the postcolonial subjects have to compete for language ability: by mastering language through appropriation and abrogation, both of them express their innermost selves and produce meaning. Language is a key area in postcolonial discourse and Bill Ashcroft holds that “worlds exist by means of languages, their horizons extending as far as the processes of neologism, innovation, tropes and imaginative usage generally will allow the horizons of the language itself to be extended”<sup>14</sup>. Such consideration can be extended to Meiji as a character who fights for her rebirth by reconstructing a fairer, more complete language: in a country whose dictatorial government decides even the names that people may adopt, the act of rediscovering language for Meiji means achieving self-confidence and vigour, always with the target of breaking the oppressive mechanisms of patriarchal power. In the end, the crucial purpose of the emancipated female/postcolonial individual is to attain language as an essential part of identity, a tool for self-representation and self-reflection. This hope is also shared by Youngest at the end of the story, when he warns the girl about the dangers of their expedition: “the very name of our country has been deleted from the record of the civilized world. So if they’re going to recognize anyone from here, on compassionate grounds, it’ll only be you. That is, a woman. Not a man. Not any men” (*E*, 417-8).

“by technoscape, I mean

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Caliban’s Voice*, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, p. 152.