ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism which links ecological concerns and feminist interests has been gaining steady ground in the last few decades. It has assumed paramount importance in the current context where preserving the planet has become the mainstay of many activists and organisations. Placing ecofeminism in the post colonial context helps to shed light on the Asian perspectives embedded therein. Hegemonic masculinities are intertwined with the destruction of nature and the oppression of women. This paper seeks to interpret Manjula Padmanbhan’s novel ‘Escape’ by placing it within this bifocal framework. The novel envisages a world of only men where women are not the ‘other’ but non-existent, having been exterminated from earth. The paper explores how the author analyses the dangers that can befall a society devoid of the other sex and shows how a man’s world is based on establishing authority and retaining control over other men, women and nature.

Keywords: Hegemony, ecofeminism, post colonialism, female extermination

INTRODUCTION

Post colonial eco feminism as a theory combines three entities and seeks to address specific concerns - of the colonized (mostly developing) countries, the ecology and the women in the third world.

Hegemonic masculinities refer to the dominance of men as a class over women and how these are reinforced and perpetuated through patriarchal institutions and practices.

The paper chooses to read Manjula Padmanabhan’s Escape through an analysis of female infanticide/foeticide as a specific post-colonial issue and explores how environmental degradation and feminist viewpoints can be combined to lend a holistic picture. It also endeavours to address the notion of hegemonic masculinities that are an off shoot of a predominantly patriarchal society.

Escape is a work of speculative fiction set in a futuristic dystopian world, in an unnamed land (but all pointers show it as India) where the last female child is brought up in secrecy. All the women have been eliminated and the storyline traces the journey of young Meiji who is the last remembrance of a long forgotten race as she plots her escape to life and freedom with the help of her uncle named Youngest.
The two primary reasons that necessitate the presence of women, according to men- procreation and sexual needs have been met by advanced cloning technology and homosexuality in the dystopian universe.

The country is ruled by the General and his special army of ruthless soldiers – ‘The Boyz’. The drones are the ‘zombie like’ servants’ who execute every command given to them. The General has eliminated the word ‘women’ from the minds of the people and uses the epithet ‘Vermin’ to describe them. The choice of vocabulary in naming each group is significant. Vermin is usually used to describe insects that are pests and are hard to get rid of. Even in this derogatory reference, the General sees how women cannot be done away with easily but he engages in a ruthless and bloody battle and finally makes the country a ‘vermin-free’ zone.

Meiji is guarded by her uncle – The Elder, the Middle and the Youngest. She is brought up literally and physically underground, in the basement of the house. The three of them know that they will be executed if the General comes to know of the presence of Meiji. When Eldest decides that it is time for Meiji to leave the land and go to a place where she would be safe, he is constantly troubled by the ‘what if possibility’ – ‘if he will find and extinguish our little diamond’ (ESC 29). Padmanabhan juxtaposes the way women are referred to by the brothers and by the General. Sensible men, even though they are surrounded by insensitive men, understand the worth and value of the girl child and treasure her like a diamond. The insensitive ruler (the General) doesn’t appreciate or acknowledge the worth of women ,the ‘vermin tribe’ , a collective group whose presence is an affront to the world of men.

The post colonial element in this analysis lies in the fact that the novel is set against the backdrop of rampant sex selective abortions in India to ensure that daughters are not born. Pilcher and Whelehan speak of how an alternative feminist perspective is essential because ‘it facilitates the re-evaluation of the homogenization of women’s experiences and seeks to redress the marginalization that women suffer within the broad framework of post-colonial studies’(103).Female infanticide and foeticide have been spreading at an alarming pace and need to be dealt with exclusively, bringing the discussions about the practice from the margins of debate to the limelight. Extermination of the girl child has been an issue plaguing many of the post-colonial countries. Much like how female genital mutilations have been the bane of African women, female infanticide and foeticide have been causes of concern in Asia. It is this worrying trend that forms the core of the novel Escape. In the West, the whole notion is a non-issue since female gender deselection exists only in Asian countries and a few pockets in Eastern Europe. The rapid spread of this Asian ill is not just frightening but presents disturbing outcomes. . This distressing phenomenon has spread from a few regions to engulf the entire country in recent years. The already skewed sex ratios at birth are continuing to dip further and further as every new census proves. The effect is visible in the ‘girl drought’ regions of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat. The craze for a male child remains unabated as mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, neighbours and relatives turn murderers, snuffing out the tender life even before the girl baby sees the light of the day.. In this context, though it is about addressing an issue that is prevalent in the oriental sphere it has acquired the proportion of a humanitarian crisis.

Postcolonial in this context need not be read within the limited purview of the after-effects of colonization -an unwanted baggage of the oppressors past, a remnant of what the ruler left to the ruled. By and large, Post- colonial studies are generally about reclaiming identity and asserting individuality for the long sidelined nations of the East seen through Western eyes, but it could also mirror concerns that are specifically third world and look at conditions that may be absent in the western world, in this context the girl child elimination.

Ecofeminism speaks of the intimate and natural bond that women and nature share and how destruction of one is invariably linked with the ruin of the other. Kate Rigby speaks of the first work of ‘ecologically oriented feminist literary criticism’ –Annette Kolodny’s The Lay of the land in 1975. Here the land is metaphorised as feminine (Wolfreys 164). In Escape, the resonance of this concept is observed – the women are dead and so is nature. In a land that has annihilated its female kind, the
environment is also bereft of life, barren. A place where vegetation was once green and vibrant, is now desolate and a bleak grey. Sterility has replaced fertility. The landscape is a nuclear wasteland with dumping of radioactive wastes. To fund their cloning project, the general accepts money from foreign powers in exchange for letting them dump their nuclear leftovers in the country. This is eerily true of how the leather and tanning industries are banned in most countries in the West, but despite polluting waterbodies, groundwater and soil, several places in India manufacture leather that is primarily exported. Padmanabhan touches a raw nerve here in exploring how post colonial relationship is very much colonial, where toxins generated in the West are discarded in the East and this is agreed to by the ambitious general who needs the capital to fund his cloning agenda.

Everything natural and brimming with life is replaced by artificial substitutes that symbolize the lack of humanness in the men who inhabit the spaces. The General’s room is described thus- ‘One wall of the room, in both rooms, was taken up with what looked like a scenic window but it was in fact a video screen. It showed the same scene, a red stony plain extending to the distant horizon, with a range of cragged and treeless mountains crowded along the left hand margin of the view. It was an artificially created image, displaying a continuously changing light show. Dawn was fixed at 5.30 and sunset at 6.45 p.m’(ESC 43). Without women, a sense of aesthetics is lost and life is mechanical, void of beauty. In this atmosphere, devoid of women, the uniqueness that women bring in is also lost. A nameless collectivity pervades the air. Individuality is sacrificed at the altar of collective will of the authority driven men. The General gloats ‘Our ancestor had generated a powerful collective of identicals — that is me, my clone-brothers — and of course the armies of Boy Warriors. Together we make a virtually invincible team ( ESC 270).

The absence of women causes a breakdown in the drive to achieve, to do things, to live. The estates in the land have all turned into ‘rundown, ramshackle places which remain productive out of inertia. It’s as if owners have given up’(ESC 75) says the General himself. When the estate of the brothers seems an oasis of prosperity amidst a desert of decrepit dump, he wonders why and suspects that they may be harbouring a girl in their premises. He links although, not intentionally prosperity with the presence of women. He conducts frequent raids to quell his doubts. Women are natural nurturers and their presence is essential for growth and sustenance of mankind is underscored effectively. In this organizational structure of identical, the power equations amongst the men are clearly hierarchal and not identical. The hegemony is established and followed blindly and implemented with an iron hand. ‘The General himself lived in tandem with a replica, identical in all but the smallest of details: a mole here, a slight excess of body hair there. They had the same fingerprints. Their footprints matched. They were never seen together.( ESC 42). The general and his clones govern the country, protected by the Boy Warriors – ‘A permanent guard of three hundred young men, known familiarly as ‘the Boyz’ was directly responsible for the General’s security and well being. The Boyz changed every two months. They strove to look identical to one another, differentiated only by the serial numbers tattooed on their foreheads. They kept their heads and faces shaved, wearing identical white suits of light body armour’.(ESC 42). The drones are midgets who work as slaves for the general and the estate owners. The power lines are clearly established. In a land of only men, there is no equality and no justice. The General ensures his survival with a body double, where no one knows who the original is. He is the autocratic head of government who places his life and authority above that of everyone else in the country. The ‘Boyz’ are trained and tuned to protect the General and implicitly obey his commands. The drones are the servant class and hence the General defines them thus in an interview –‘A designated labour species, subhuman and incapable of self-regeneration ( ESC 270). The clones for both the Boyz and the drones can be generated only by the General, who wields his clout authoritatively. Thus the all men are not equal rather inequality reigns unbridled with the General holding the whip of control. Padmanabhan models this hegemonic division of power almost along the lines of a bee or a termite colony, where divisions define roles. In a twist of irony, it is the General’s world that is like an insect kingdom but he chooses to call women ‘vermin’.
Patricia Sexton suggests that ‘male norms stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body.’ (Donaldson 7). This is amply exemplified in Escape by the men who inhabit the womanless nation. The definition by Mike Donaldson is illuminating in this context - Hegemonic masculinity is “a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance.” Through hegemonic masculinity most men benefit from the control of women. For a very few men, it delivers control of other men. To put it another way, the crucial difference between hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities is not (just) the control of women, but the control of men and the representation of this as “universal social advancement,” to paraphrase Gramsci (45).

The morality of the men is also dubious. Having eliminated all women, there is no moral code that the men follow. The only relationship amongst the men is the one defined by power. One aspect that Padmanabhan emphasizes is the overwhelming violence that marks the actions of men. Without women, there is no tempering, there is no rational thinking in resolving conflicts - there is only an irrational, illogical all-consuming thirst for power and authority.

Gilligan speaks of how ‘men are oriented toward “separateness”, whereas women are oriented toward “connectedness” and “care”’ (Brannon 117). Without the presence of women to bring down aggressive anger and to quell frayed tempers, there is internal strife beginning with some drones killing other drones. There is a hint that the country is headed towards an imminent anarchy.

CONCLUSION

Escape speaks of how the General and his men carry forward a practice that is already in existence - ‘they had been practicing various forms of elimination in the years leading up to the Change’ (ESC 270). The General talks of how convenient and ripe the environment was already to eliminate women - ‘The existing deficit of females in our world enormously aided our task’ (ESC 270).

When Meiji is finally almost in safe zone outside the grasp of the General(s), Youngest tells her that she needs to travel alone from then now. When Meiji protests, asking him why he would not accompany her any further, he talks about the tragedy of belonging to a land that practices the heinous crime of girl elimination. “I belong to a place that is no longer mentioned outside our borders. That’s the price we paid for what was identified by a famous international body called the United Nations, as ‘the most extreme crime against humanity our planet has ever yet acknowledged.’ 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’ (ESC 418). Women are forced to become gender refugees moving from their homeland which kills them to a safer place that lets them live. Padmanabhan clearly and categorically indictsin India for its attitude towards girls and how this has been observed by United Nations and condemned.

Every speculative fiction does derive its premise from a slice of reality. It is this portending of the future- of predicting what would happen if we eliminate our girls that Padmanabhan wants to dwell upon. She wants India to wake up to the reality of what is happening to its unborn daughters. It is important to recall Vandana Shiva’s words in this context – “In recovering the chances for the survival of all life, they are laying the foundations for the recovery of the feminine principle in nature and society, and through it the recovery of the earth as sustainer and provider’(Shiva 224). The feminine factor is crucial for the survival of earth and survival of mankind. Culling women is akin to killing the life sustaining earth and this is an important connect that Padmanabhan establishes through her novel.

REFERENCES

The novel Escape is abbreviated as ESC for quoting and reference purposes.


Web references