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Posthuman Feminism: Reconfiguring Gender, Identity and Agency – A Study in Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls*

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Abstract
Posthuman feminism paves the way to understanding gender, identity, and agency in a fast changing technological and hybrid world. This theory arises from the intersection of posthumanism and feminist theory, each of which criticises the basic ideas of humanism. Human beings are rational, independent, and distinctly separate from non-human entities. Posthuman feminism defies fixed gender binaries, criticises anthropocentric thinking, and seeks to redefine the boundaries of embodiment in relation to technology. Due to the advancements in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and cybernetics the difference between human and machine gets complicated. The identity and gender should be understood as fluid, dynamic, and co-constructed with technology. This paper examines how posthuman feminism deploys traditional conceptions of gender and identity, reimagines agency and embodiment, and investigates power dynamics with special reference to Manjula Padmanabhan's The Island of Lost Girls. Drawing Rosi Braidotti's Posthuman Feminism, the study exposes the new materialist ideas which integrate the impacts of technology and a critique of human exceptionalism. It also proposes that gender is continually reconfigured in a complex, post human world.

Keywords: Posthuman Feminism, Gender, Identity, Agency, Technology, New Materialism, Artificial Intelligence, Cybernetics

Introduction

Rosi Braidotti's Posthuman Feminism (2022) stimulates the people to take action to the converging crises of neoliberalism, ecological collapse, and techno scientific transformation. Despite all the technological development women have been continually confront the injustices of sexism and racism. In their place, the posthuman subject emerges as a site of resistance and possibility. They challenge the biological and sociocultural binaries that continue to govern gender identity and discrimination. The society has implemented many safeguard measures to women, but the female infanticide and gendered violence still persists. Padmanabhan's The Island of Lost Girls (2015) manifests these anxieties, presenting a dystopian future where techno-patriarchal regimes commercialise reproduction and destroy female subjectivity. This article examines how Padmanabhan's novel exposes contemporary misogyny while interrogating the precarious entanglement of gender, technology, and power in a posthuman world.

Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls*

Manjula Padmanabhan's The Island of Lost Girls (2015) portrays how a father namely Youngest tries to protect his child from the misogynist world. He is ready to undergo sexual reassignment so that he will take his daughter Meiji to the all- female island where she will have a secured future. However, Youngest (later Yasmine) retains a masculine consciousness within a surgically altered female body. The narrative unfolds through dual psychological trajectories: Meiji's struggle to reconcile with her hidden anatomy (a truth suppressed by her uncles) and Yasmine's fraught negotiation with bodily alienation. These parallel arcs expose the contradictions of enforced womanhood. A conversation between the General and the Interviewer reveals the novel's theme of biopolitical control and gendered violence. The General has the vision of cleansing the world by creation of clones. He wants to eliminate dissent and equate uniformity with progress. Most disturbingly, he justifies the elimination of females by claiming they are biologically driven to compete for reproduction. This pseudo-scientific reasoning exposes how patriarchal systems use technology and biology to justify the erasure of female agency. The article explores such technocratic ideologies, showing how scientific discourse can be weaponised to enforce conformity, suppress dissent, and normalise systemic violence under the guise of collective good.

This novel reveals the General's misogynist attitude of considering female existence as a barrier to techno-utopian order. He also equates femininity with uncontrollable biological drives that mirrors real-world patriarchal anxieties about reproductive autonomy. Padmanabhan's dystopia thus functions as an allegory, exposing how gendered violence is prevalent even in futures presumably engineered for progress.

The General's monologue reveals the Brotherhood's reduction of women to mere corporeality, denying them any identity beyond biological function. The irony, however, lies in the Brotherhood's own paradoxical ethos: while they exploit women's supposed biological determinism-framing them as weak, driven by mindless reproductive urges—they simultaneously pursue a collective neural network that erases individuality altogether. As the General proclaims, "We are the past, the future, and the present. We have broken through the shackles of individuality" (Padmanabhan 356–357).

This contradiction becomes even more destabilizing when considering the duology's depiction of ectogenesis-a technology that, in radical feminist discourse, once promised liberation from patriarchal reproductive control. Instead of emancipating women, however, its realization in this dystopia leads to their obsolescence. With cloning perfected, women are rendered functionally extinct, their roles as biological reproducers replaced by engineered bodies: the hyper-masculinized Generals (intellectually and physically enhanced enforcers of patriarchal homogeneity), the disposable drones ("midget slaves who perform your menial tasks," 256), and the replicas (mass-produced male copies to sustain population).

Here, the novel exposes a grim inversion of feminist techno-utopianism: rather than dismantling gendered oppression, the Brotherhood's posthuman project replicates its logic, mechanizing hierarchies under the guise of transcending them. Padmanabhan's narrative provocatively interrogates the constructed nature of gendered identity through Meiji's visceral, often traumatic, confrontation with embodiment. Denied access to bodily autonomy and forced to navigate sensations she has been systematically alienated. She perceives herself as monstrous: "'I want to know whether or not I've become a monster yet,' she said. 'Woman,' said Youngest" (Padmanabhan 308). This moment encapsulates the novel's central tension: while Meiji struggles to reconcile with her physicality, Youngest, subjected to surgical alteration, exists in a paradoxical state of coerced womanhood. Both characters endure the simultaneous denial and imposition of femininity. Yet they accept their fractured selves. This suggests a radical reimagining of identity beyond normative

constraints. In her conversation with Pandey, the author herself asserts, "it's important to look beyond gender and beyond body-based boundaries […] to find a higher definition of self" (Pandey 2018). This ethos is embodied in Meiji's defiant exploration of her own body—a journey marked by resistance and devoid of meaningful guidance, save for the distorted representations found in pornographic material. In one striking exchange, Meiji's insistence on self-knowledge clashes with societal demands for propriety:

> 'I want you to act your age. If you want to be treated with respect, then you got to behave with dignity –'
> 'Yesterday I pushed my fingers inside –'
> 'What?'
> 'You told me not to do it, but I did. I pushed my fingers in. And there was nothing in there.' […]
> 'Yes. I used a mirror, so that I could see what I was doing. It looked yucky. Just like in the pictures.'
> 'Will you promise me you won't do it again?' […]
> 'No,' said Meiji. 'I won't promise. It's my body. I want to understand—'
>
> (Padmanabhan 328–329).

Here, Meiji's refusal to comply underscores the novel's postmodern engagement with agency, framing self-discovery as an act of rebellion against prescribed norms. Padmanabhan does not merely critique gendered oppression; she dismantles the very frameworks that seek to define and confine the body, offering instead a vision of identity as mutable, contested, and ultimately self-determined.

Women's social subordination has long been justified through their reproductive roles, which are discursively constructed as both biologically essential and existentially defining. Radical feminist critiques—which seek to liberate women from the naturalized imperative of motherhood—are grotesquely inverted in Padmanabhan's duology, where the totalitarian state resolves the "problem" of gender by eradicating women entirely. With motherhood rendered obsolete and childcare stripped of social meaning, the regime replaces organic reproduction with cloning, producing a homogenized underclass of neural-network-linked masculine subhumans (the "Droneries"). Though initially framed as a pragmatic solution to demographic collapse—Brotherland's male populace is sustained through these artificial means—the systemic violence underpinning this project extends beyond the extermination of women.

The dystopian horror of this regime manifests not only in the voluntary surrender of women by complicit families (rewarded with political favors and Droneries) but also in the pervasive sexual exploitation of men and boys. This is epitomized by Swan, a plantation owner whose cloning operations are paralleled by his predation on young male laborers. A visceral exchange among the workers Pigeon, Bamboo, and Youngest exposes the cyclical abuse: "'You weren't here,' […] 'You don't know what he did.' 'We each had our younger brothers when we came,' said Pigeon. […] 'He only recruited those who could offer him that price. First, he used the young ones. Then he made us watch him use them. Then he made us use them […]'" (Padmanabhan 239).

Notably, the state's gendered purge overlooks non-binary identities entirely, relegating figures like Aila—a trans woman surviving in the interstitial "Zone"—to marginal existence marked by violence. The regime's logic reduces identity to anatomical determinism, as seen in the General's classification of Youngest as a "reverse" (a man inhabiting a woman's body). This taxonomy parodies the feminist ideal of "sisterhood", instead presenting a grotesque mirror: the "Brotherhood", a collective of generals fused by neural networks, embodies the dystopian endpoint of patriarchal absolutism. Posthuman reinforces the modification and promises the illusion of progress by cloning and bodily transformation. In reality the gendered violence prevails in a new form.

The island's beliefs does not explicitly endorse reproductive norms, yet its fixation on Meiji's virginity reveals an underlying ideological contradiction. While the other girls bear visible scars—both physical and psychological—from systemic violence, Meiji is conspicuously marked by an aura of untouched purity, framed as a vessel of latent fertility: "She has a quality of absolute innocence. It's like a titanium shield, that innocence. [...] You may call it virginity if you want, Zera. Or moral purity, Maia. But I maintain that it's something beyond either of these" (Padmanabhan 174). This idealized innocence functions as both a protective barrier and a symbolic currency, reinforcing the very gendered binaries that the island ostensibly resists. In this way, women who defy Brotherland's oppression risk replicating its logic, becoming trapped in an oppositional extreme that still privileges notions of purity and damage.

The novel's world is one of unrelenting patriarchal violence, where virginity—as a construct—has been systematically obliterated. Every girl arriving on the island carries the brutal evidence of this erasure, their bodies serving as archives of trauma. As Mentor Vane explains, "…the majority of them come here like rag dolls with their stuffing torn out of them. They spend days and sometimes weeks in the regenerative solution, just to get their bodies working again. The surgical scars, the piercings and tattoos from their previous lives remain on their bodies as evidence of that life" (Padmanabhan 270). The island's project of healing thus operates within a paradox: it seeks to restore agency to these survivors while navigating a world that has already defined them through violation.

Padmanabhan's own commentary, articulated in her conversation with Rachana Pandey, challenges the fatalistic framing of sexual violence as an inescapable "doom" for women: "I reject the notion that there is a special doom called 'rape' hanging over the heads of all women. … I know that rape is believed to be so awful that we're not allowed to imagine what it might be like to recover from it. In my view, however, that's masculine propaganda. … in order to fight the power of that myth, we have to stop believing in the power of rape" (Pandey). This assertion reframes resilience as resistance, rejecting the patriarchal narrative that reduces women to perpetual victims. Yet, the novel complicates this stance by depicting the material realities of trauma—suggesting that while the myth of rape's irreparable damage must be dismantled, the systemic conditions enabling such violence remain engrained.

The novel's radical imperative—"stop believing in the power of rape"—resonates through its depiction of the island as a space of feminist resistance and corporeal reclamation. As Pankaj Kumar observes in "An Eco-anarchist Analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's The Island of Lost Girls," the mentors on the island engage in a dual project of psychological and physiological transformation: conditioning female minds and bodies to reject internalized patriarchal codes while forging a new, empowered subjectivity (Kumar). Vane, one such mentor, articulates this mission as restoring survivors to "something like normalcy" (270)—a process that entails not only physical and psychological healing but also the cultivation of "Equal Dignity."

Central to this reclamation is the deliberate unshaming of the female body. The island's inhabitants are encouraged to embrace nudity, rejecting societal stigma and redefining their bodies as "instruments of social change" (114). This ritualistic exposure—framed as both spiritual cleansing ("by opening our bodies to air and sunlight we cleanse our spirit") and political assertion—underscores a foundational principle: "own your bodies before you can heal completely" (Padmanabhan 114). Unlike the Zone, where women remain commodified for their beauty and sexual utility, the island cultivates an ethos of bodily autonomy divorced from conventional femininity. Here, scars and disfigurements are not marks of victimhood but testaments to survival, as the girls are rigorously trained as warriors for an impending revolt against the General's regime.

This narrative aligns with posthuman feminism's destabilization of fixed identities, particularly its rejection of essentialist gender binaries. Posthuman feminism, as a theoretical framework,

reimagines agency and embodiment in an era of technological hybridity, positing identity as fluid, relational, and co-constituted with non-human actors (Braidotti; Hayles). The island's project—transforming traumatized bodies into sites of resistance—mirrors the posthuman feminist vision of the body as a "process of becoming" (Braidotti), where corporeal and technological interventions can subvert patriarchal norms. However, Padmanabhan's novel also critiques the limits of such liberation: while the island's warriors embody a rupture from traditional gender roles, their struggle remains entangled with material violence and systemic oppression.

Conclusion

The main objective of the study is understanding how Manjula Padmanabhan's women challenge pre-existing preconceptions and advance the ideas of female empowerment and agency. The study incorporates a feminist lens in the critique and analysis which provides deeper insight into the societal structure, gender dynamics and the evolving role of women in society. Her novel brings a significant shift in the portrayal of women. The Island of Lost Girls (2015) advocates for a paradigm where self-worth supplants beauty, and resilience displaces victimhood. Yet, it simultaneously exposes the tensions within posthuman feminism—namely, the risk of abstracting empowerment from lived inequities. By grounding its feminist utopia in bodily praxis and collective resistance, the novel offers a provocative counterpoint to both patriarchal domination and neoliberal posthuman fantasies, insisting that true agency requires not just reimagining the body, but reclaiming it.

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