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Concept of Beauty in the Selected Works of Manjula Padmanabhan

Abstract

Manjula Padmanabhan, the Indian English Fiction writer is a self proclaimed feminist who sees beauty and all its associated notions as patriarchal concept. She is a prolific writer who has short stories, novels, plays, a travel memoir and cartoons to her credit. She tries to dismantle the stereotypical notions of feminine beauty through her subversive works. Her works be it fictional or non fictional attests to a notion of beauty which is all about self acceptance and self love. Her fictional works such as the short story “Urmila the Ultimate”, her dystopian novels *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* and her travel memoir *Getting There* disapproves the existing notions of feminine beauty and projects a new alternative. The paper aims to probe the concept of beauty in Padmanabhan’s works. It aims to configure the author’s standpoint on concept such as feminine beauty and notions attached to beauty in the context of her fictional as well as non fictional work. Issues such as body disfiguration,

anorexia, body image are also tied to the idea of beauty and the paper aims to discuss these issues in the light of Padmanabhan's works.

Keywords: Anorexia, Body Disfiguration, Body Image, Feminine Beauty, Patriarchal

1. Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan is an Indian English fiction writer renowned for her Onassis award winning play *Harvest*. Her works deal with a number of themes like female infanticide, violence against women, social hypocrisy and apathy, communal violence, patriarchal setups. She is a self-proclaimed feminist who believes in gender fluidity. She often uses dystopian futuristic setups to discuss pressing issues of the present. In her interview to Kanishka Ramchandani she says "What most people around the globe are experiencing right now is a dystopia, in the present. My novel is only mildly fictional and futuristic — much of what happens in it is within the realm of possibility." She often uses dark humour to articulate her points. In an interview to Parshathy J. Nath she explains "My view of reality is dark even in the comic strip, but I present it with a little twist that makes it seem like a joke". The notion of beauty often related to physical appearances is undermined by the author in her works. Physical appearance is secondary to the author compared to a person's inner worth and personality. Her memoir as well as her fictional works espouse her feminist stand which devalues beauty ideals of femininity.

2. *Getting There*

Getting There is the travel memoir of the writer Manjula Padmanabhan. It is the author's quest for love, spiritual fulfilment, weight loss spanning three countries. The author is candid about her personal life and she is unapologetic about her failures in her professional as well as personal life. The author proclaims herself to be a feminist who does not care about her appearance and admits to not having any feminine interests in her memoir. Her need for

reducing weight makes her consult a doctor who specialises in drastically altering the weight of his clients by making them undertake a strict diet regimen. Manjula's attempts to reduce weight makes her undertake this diet regimen which consists of fat free foods. Manjula does not believe in the conventional standards of beauty. She didn't aspire to have an abnormally thin figure. Though she was conscious of her body image she could not see herself as subscribing to the conventional often stereotypical standards of beauty which dictated a woman to have a thin waist and wide hips. The hint of sarcasm in her voice is unmistakable as she compares the pictures of nude women post their weight loss to something diseased and their bodies as cartoon. Manjula is not flattered with the pictures of nude woman which the doctor shows her as a proof of his skill. She has disdain for the prize patient of the doctor who has now been reduced to a "sack of loose brown skin" (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 10). She does not approve of the unrealistic body figures shown in the photograph by her doctor to depict the after effects of his successful weight reduction programme. Manjula prized individuality more than conforming to the needs and expectations of the society. After seeing the nude photos of women post their weight loss she remembers having met a woman who had a second thumb on his right hand. The author remembers having thought well of the woman for having accepted her own irregularity rather than trying to change it. Manjula does not believe in cosmetic procedures like plastic surgery to enhance one's beauty as she is adamant that she does not want to look like "a surgeon's embroidery sample". The nude photos of the patients makes her question the woman's intention in losing weight. It made her think whether the woman did this of her own volition or was forced to do owing to her husband who wanted a slender wife. Manjula herself is a feminist who does not believe in the idea of marriage or having children. She signs up for the weight reduction programme for her own self rather than for appeasing those around her. She has disdain for the prize patient whom she doubts has succumbed to the pressure of her husband to reduce weight. Even

though Manjula admits to not having any self image, she rejects the doctors suggestion that her overeating maybe a result of her “feelings of inadequacy, a desire to overcompensate” (12)

Manjula does not feel any need to make herself presentable or attractive for a man. Her unhappiness over her figure was due to the fact that she was overweight. Her decision to reduce weight is prompted by her realization that she was overweight. She was not beauty conscious; she regarded the ideals and standards of beauty as the trappings of patriarchal society. The idea of making herself presentable for marriage is an anathema to the writer. She does not feel “marriage as an institution ...is the best way for men and women to, you know live together” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 13). She believes marriage to be an “instrument of patriarchy” which was “only a system...used to control women’s sexuality- to define it” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 13). She feels guilty for betraying her feminist self when she lies to the doctor about liking jewellery and perfumes as part of her psychometric test. According to Manjula regards the concept of “masculine and feminine were outmoded concepts” and “as a woman” whatever she did “ should be considered adequately feminine without requiring external reference points” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 15). She does not subscribe to the idea of femininity and all the notions of beauty attached to it. This is the very reason she refuses to dress or act in a feminine manner. When Manjula is asked to draw a silhouette of two figures- a man and a woman, she is in a dilemma whether to draw the figure of a long haired woman which would be the ideal feminine woman or with short hair just like her., her feminist self scorns at the idea of femininity and the notions of beauty attached to it. When she sees a fellow patient, a young woman in her twenties decked in the garments of a newlywed, she is filled with disdain for the young woman whom she felt to be “a human Pomeranian attached to her lord husband by a leash of gold chains” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 23). She asks herself whether she would be willing to “be weighed down with gold, my

face obscured under a mash of rogue and mascara!” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 23). She can “NEVER” ever be like this young woman as her feminist self was against the very idea of marriage and all its associated roles and responsibilities.

Manjula has a humorous take on fat and thin people rather than dismissing the fat or obese people as unglamorous and unattractive, she regards it as a matter of one’s class or status. She feels “fat is an attention getting asset, whether it is stored on the body or in the bank” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 23). She feels that “rich people get fat because their intake of food far outstrips their bodies energy requirements” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 23). Poor people only look thin “because they cannot afford the sort of food intake that produces a surplus of energy to store as fat” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 23). What distinguishes a rich person and a poor person is merely the glamour associated with dressing expensively as “the rich of today are obliged to look thin and dress expensively” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 23). Manjula is also surprised at the drastic result of weight reduction which is followed by a commensurate increase in a person’s attractiveness. The sight of a woman who was a “lower middle class frump in a plain cotton sari” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 22) changed into a “glamorous affluent six kitten” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 22) post her weight reduction is beyond her grasp. The tone of sarcasm in her voice in the description of the woman is unmistakable. This may also indicate Manjula’s implicit distrust and rejection of the conventional beauty standards which dictate a woman to have a thin figure.

Manjula’s account of her formative years points to her rejection of the beauty ideal. As a young girl she was distrustful of the stories which “stressed the importance of beauty in a heroine’s life” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 61). No matter how “deformed or wretched “the heroine was, by the end of the story would miraculously become beautiful. This beautiful heroine would then attract “a mate of the dragon slaying, glass mountain

scaling class who would provide her with a secure place in which to raise a brood of children” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 61). Manjula’s account of the typical damsel in distress stories is humorous as well as sarcastic. She did not identify herself as the beautiful heroine but as a “goose girl who volunteers to be the dragon’s first victim because she’s too plain to be anything else” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 61). As a child she was pudgy and cross eyed, at thirteen, she wore braces and at fourteen she suffered short sightedness. For these reasons she did not see herself “enjoy a heroine’s fate” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 61). At fifteen and sixteen, she “grew frontally and had pimples to contend with and frizzy hair to be quelled with curlers soaked in beer” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 61). She began to change her unassuming and nondescript clothes for a more flashy flamboyant dressing style when decides to create a persona for herself as an artist. After studying the appearance of talented and successful people, she began to dress like them in the hope of being as successful as them. Her dressing at this time included “bright clingy t shirts that caused men in the street to breathe in sharply” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 64). She also wore gold ornaments and makeup at this point of time hoping to achieve the status of a successful artist. All this changed following her initiation into feminism at eighteen when she realized that “there were problems far worse than being frizzy haired, bespectacled and fat” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 64). In the name of feminist solidarity she toned down her clothes and stopped wearing makeup all together. Being plain or beautiful no longer mattered to Manjula as she had made a decision to die at thirty for want of any good reason to live beyond it. Manjula’s changing dressing style and appearance throughout her formative years points to the fact that she has never aspired to be someone conventionally beautiful. Even though she dabbles in flashy clothes to create a persona of a successful artist, her initiation to feminism makes her discard all the trappings of the patriarchal society.

She indulges herself in fat rich junk food during her stay in America and Holland disregarding her diet. At this point, the only dress she could wear was “a loose fitting, long sleeved silk shirt” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 295). The obsession with body figure might also lead to more dangerous psychological conditions like anorexia. Manjula is sorry for Pete’s sister Juliana who was recovering from anorexia. Juliana calls herself fat inspite of the fact that she had starved herself to the point “where her hair had fallen out and her teeth rooted in her gums in pursuit of the goal of perfect weightlessness” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 296). Manjula is not obsessed with dieting or her body figure as she knew that she “could not match that kind of dedication nor did I want to try” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 296). She does not want to be reduced the plight of Juliana. The plight of Juliana makes her “feel positively happy to be overweight” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 296). The condition of Juliana makes her realize the repercussions of unrealistic beauty standards. In the final section titled “Holland” the author even though admitting to be “an unattractively fat” (Padmanabhan, *Getting There* 330) is happy to be alive and breathing normally. The very fact that she was alive was reason enough to celebrate and be thankful for. It does not matter to Manjula that she has failed in all the quests she had undertaken. The mere fact of being alive and being in control of her life makes her happy. The memoir ends on a note of self acceptance. The author chooses to celebrate her flaws and failures rather than see them as a mark of her incompetence. Her memoir ends on a note of positivity. The fact of being alive is to be cherished and celebrated more than attaining an unhealthy thin figure.

3. *Escape*

Escape is set in a country devoid of women. It is ruled by an army of clone brothers each named as General. In her review Jaishree Misra gives a concise summary of the novel, “*Escape* is the story of teenager Meiji who is the only surviving female in a country that has wiped out the fairer sex. The land is ruled by a general and marshalled by his marauding

Boyz. Meiji has been kept hidden in an estate and reared by her three Uncles – Uncle Zero, Uncle One and Uncle Two”. The General call this country as Brotherland while the other nations of the world who condemn the General for his atrocities call this country as the Forbidden Country as its very name is erased from official records. The General and his clone brothers were invented in a laboratory by General’s ancestors who procure the fund for this experiment from the rich and elite in the name of scientific progress. The General along with his clone brothers represent a patriarchal dispensation who regards women as “vermins”. The years preceding General’s ascension to power was followed by a large scale extermination of women and girls of all ages, ““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’(Bhaskar, Vanitha, “The dynamics of post colonial ecofeminism and hegemonic masculinities in manjula padmanabhan’s Escape”) . Women were regarded as inimical to the collective ethic represented by the Generals and a new technology was invented to replace human reproduction. Homosexuality became the norm in General’s Brotherland following the extermination of women. Scores of transvestites now populated he streets of Brotherland. The ideal of feminine beauty once cherished in the heydays was now replaced by a new standard. Men with feminine features as well as transvestites were considered as beautiful or sexually attractive by the men in the Brotherland. The paucity of women had also led to the emergence of homosexuality. The men in this country have no idea about what a woman looks like as General had destroyed all existing literature on women in addition to exterminating them. Young boys with feminine features and transvestites are considered beautiful and sexually attractive in this country. Even though Meiji conceals her identity with mauve tinted spectacles and is disguised as a

boy, her “delicate nose, sculpted cheekbones and full mouth conspired to create a profile that was stubbornly beautiful” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 347-348) attracts the attention of Budget. Budget, the administrator of the city is instantly taken in by the sight of Meiji even though she was dressed as a boy. He even pried on Meiji whenever Youngest was not looking at him. Budget is arguably attracted to Meiji and he even gives her flimsy see through clothes to wear. This indicates the change in the beauty ideal in the Brotherland. Before the Change or the extermination of women a heterosexual norm existed. After the Change, transvestites and young boys with feminine features began to be considered sexually attractive and beautiful by the male only populace.

Transvestites are most often employed in the pleasure industry in the Brotherland. Budget calls three transvestites for the entertainment of the General and Youngest while in his palace. This “minor entertainment” is a highly sexual acrobatic act, a performance by some transvestites. These performers “engaged in a series of acrobatic couplings” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 374) intended to excite their spectators. Male desire which earlier was fixated on women came to be now fixated on transvestites. Young boys presented themselves as sexually alluring and attractive by dressing themselves in women’s clothes. For instance, Penta transforms himself into “a delicate simpering being, wearing heels and a shimmering black velvet outfit” for the gathering at the palace. On seeing Penta, Budget describes the boys appearance as “all sandpapered and shiny skinned” (385) even though he admits to have liked someone with a “slightly rougher surface” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 386). There is a sexual innuendo in Budget’s description of Penta. This point to the predatory nature of male sexual desires. Transvestites came to be considered as alluring, sexually attractive and beautiful following the Change also making them a prey to male desires. When Meiji makes her first appearance in the Continuum Palace she is ogled at by the men gathered there even though she was dressed as a boy. Meiji with her feminine features attracted the attention of

the crowd who admired her for her “perfect definition of his mouth, his delicate jaw line and the shapely set of his nose” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 383). There was also a rumour among the crowd that Meiji was Youngest’s concubine. This indicates that it was a perfectly normal practise in Brotherland to take young beautiful boys as concubines. When it is revealed that Meiji is actually Youngest’s blood generate, not his concubine, the crowd gleams at her “in hope and lust” (Padmanabhan, *Escape* 384). Females are still considered beautiful and sexually attractive by men secretly in the Brotherland. For instance when the estate owner Swan comes to know that Meiji is a girl, he at once asks Youngest to undress her to see her naked. Moreover Swan also had a copy of pornographic material which contained pictures of women engaged in various sexual acts. Youngest, Meiji’s father is arguably attracted to her. The novel has some passages which shows this attraction as explained by Jai Arjun Singh in his review of the novel, “ an earlier passage that acutely captures the book's moral ambiguity is the one where the two of them are bathing together and though Youngest’s feelings are not explicitly spelled out for the reader, a throwaway sentence indicates that he has become aroused by the naked girl; that in spite of his conscious ideas about right and wrong, his body is instinctively responding to hers”. Even though associating with women was considered an offence, women were secretly considered as beautiful, sexually attractive and the centre of male desire and attraction.

4. *The Island of Lost Girls*

The Island of Lost Girls, the sequel to *Escape* is set twenty years after the formation of the Brotherland in *Escape*. The novel is set in a post apocalyptic dystopian world. *The Asian Age* review of the novel explains so about the title, “The Island, in the novel, is formed in the first place to protect the “lost girls”. As one of the mentors of the Island explains: “Once it was clear that there would only ever be all-men’s teams, the whole shameful exploitation of women who live in the Zone — as booty, as trophies, as entertainment,

whatever — became the established norm.” The novel is set in a male dominated world which is marked by violence towards women. There are no virgins remaining in this world as all girls have faced some abuse at some point of time. The girls who come to this island have faced the worst kind of physical and sexual abuse which the mentors in the island try to repair and heal 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, *The Island of Lost Girls* 270). Pankaj Kumar in his “An Eco-anarchism analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan’s *The Island of Lost Girls*” explains so about the purpose of the mentors in the island, “The Mentor of the Island was conditioning the minds and physical structures of females’ bodies. In this female zone, women are able to discard the social code and patriarchal rules from the mind of those females who unfortunately spent their time in misogynistic zone. The Island is scientifically so advanced that it has capability to make female bodies stronger both physically and mentally” According to vane the whole purpose of the island “is to return them to something like normalcy” (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 270) which involves “healing their physical and mental wound” but also “instilling a sense of what we call Equal Dignity”. In the island girls are asked to embrace their naked bodies as it is believed that they are “instruments of social change” (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 114) and “by opening our bodies to air and sunlight we cleanse our spirit” (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 114). Such an initiation is necessary as one needs to “own your bodies before you can heal completely” (Padmanabhan, *The Island of Lost Girls* 114).

The girls in the island are asked to embrace their bodies with all its flaws. In *The Pioneer* review of the novel Ipshta Nath says “...Moreover, she brings up important

discourses on body shame, body aesthetics and so on. These debates are incorporated through the vivid scenes in the narrative wherein the inmates of the island are trained to embrace their imperfections, and which I will leave the reader to discover on their own". The girls within the island do not have any notions of femininity. They are trained to be warriors for an unknown future battle. This is in contrast to the girls in the Zone who are still prized for their beauty and sexual attractiveness which makes them a prey of male desires. Padmanabhan emphasises on embracing bodily flaws in the novel just like getting there. The island run by women is trying to mobilise an active army of women soldiers which will help them in their fight against the violent practises of the Zone as well as the General's rule. The girls in the island despite their disfigured bodies are trained to be warriors inculcated with respect, pride and dignity in their own self. Padmanabhan emphasised the need for self worth rather than beauty.

5. "Urmila the Ultimate"

"Urmila the Ultimate" is about urmila, a girl who is regarded as so hideous that anyone who meets her runs away from her in disgust. The nurse who helps out her mother in the labour ward faints on seeing the newborn Urmila. Her grandparents make excuses to avoid visiting her. Urmila's parents are oblivious to the reaction evoked by Urmila's appearance. They regard her as any other girl child disregarding her physical appearance completely. As a person, urmila was well mannered and not prone to tantrums like most kids her age. Her parents are so impressed with her amiable and understanding nature that they prefer to discuss their problems with her rather than with their friends. The adverse reaction which her appearance evokes is exaggerated by the author. For instance when she is first met by the principal of her school miss Whattawiggly Patel "her multi tiered hairpiece flew straight up into the air. Her bright orange silk sari unravelled to the floor...Her false eyelashes melted and fused together so that she went temporarily blind. Her nail polish burst

into flames” (Padmanabhan, *Unprincess* 69-70). The author puts in no uncertain terms that Urmila is ugly. Urmila’s appearance proves to be an asset when she is recruited by the army to defeat rival soldiers. It is in this way she puts her appearance to good use. The sight of Urmila in the battlefield makes the rival faction concede defeat as they are horrified by her appearance. Gajanan Sitaram Deshmukh in his article “Unprincess are really Princess and virginity is invisible in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Unprincess* and *Three Virgins and Other Stories*” comments so about the ending of the story, “Now Urmila is their Ultimate Weapon. Urmila defeated the foes and became the real heroine of her nation. Urmila used her ugliness to serve the nation. Her curse was now turned into the blessings” (35). The use of Urmila in the battlefield is kept a classified secret by the army. Even though she does not receive any public attention for her act in the battlefield, at the end of the story she is able to attain a semblance of normality in her life. The people who rejected her become more accepting of her.

The writer Padmanabhan is emphasising on Urmila’s inner beauty which is her character, her endearing persona. She also does not try to gloss over Urmila’s appearance. Neither Urmila nor her parents tries to find acceptance in society by subjecting her to cosmetic procedures. They embrace their appearance rather than finding a way to correct it so as to conform to the expectations of those around them. The adverse reaction evoked by the sight of Urmila’s appearance is enough to drive most of the parents to resort to extraneous measures like cosmetic surgery to correct their daughters appearance which might be viewed as an anomaly in an increasingly beauty conscious society. The short story primarily aimed at children emphasises the value of inner beauty or personality which is more important than all external appearances.

6. Conclusion

Manjula Padmanabhan's works attest a notion of beauty which is all about inner appearances, self worth, and personality. Her works disapprove the conventional standards of beauty. Her memoir *Getting There* is her realization and acceptance of who she is irrespective of her physical appearance. The novel *Escape* depicts that beauty is after all a norm subject to change. *The Island of Lost Girls*, the sequel to *Escape*, is about embracing one's body and has a message of positive body image and acceptance. "Urmila, the Ultimate" the short story in the collection *Unprincess* lays emphasis on inner appearances rather than external appearances. Urmila's appearance regarded as her bane by the society proves to be an asset, an ultimate weapon of destruction while deployed in the battlefield. Padmanabhan's works are a testimony to the idiom "beauty is only skin deep".

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