

Arathi Babu

Research Scholar

St. Aloysius College

Calicut University

Kerala, India

Panoptic Surveillance in the Orwellian Dystopia of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape*

Abstract

Escape is a dystopian novel by the Indian English writer Manjula Padmanabhan. The novel envisages a male dominated world bereft of any human values. The dystopia presented in the novel is characterised by its totalitarian government, environmental disaster, surveillance, violence. Dystopian novels abound in totalitarian authorities who restrict individual freedom. Panoptic surveillance is an essential part of the totalitarian rule. An individual is effectively disciplined using surveillance. Discipline works by a calculated gaze rather than force. Michel Foucault in his 1977 work *Discipline and Punish* uses Jeremy Bentham's model of the panopticon, a building which has a specialised way of arranging inmates to demonstrate how surveillance serves to discipline individuals. The paper intends to study the panoptic surveillance mechanism used by the totalitarian regime and its efficacy/ inefficacy in disciplining individuals.

Introduction

Escape is a 2008 dystopian novel written by Manjula Padmanabhan. It is followed by a 2015 sequel *The Island of Lost Girls*. *Escape* as its name suggests is about the escape of Meiji from the forbidden country aided by her guardian Youngest. The novel is set in

forbidden country or “the brotherhood” as the General calls it. It is ruled by General a despotic ruler and his clone brothers who were mass produced in laboratories.

The Dystopia in *Escape*

The dystopia in *Escape* can be described as “Orwellian”. The adjective Orwellian is derived from George Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Orwellian dystopia is characterised by a totalitarian regime, misinformation, surveillance, propaganda, denial of truth, manipulation of past. The word “Orwellian” has been accepted into the English language as an adjective that is often used to describe a totalitarian dystopia characterised by extreme governmental control and subjection of people.

The novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* is set in Airstrip One, a province of the superstate Oceania in a world of perpetual war, omnipresent government surveillance, and public manipulation. The superstate and its residents are dictated to by a political regime euphemistically named English Socialism, shortened to "Ingsoc" in Newspeak, the government's invented language. The superstate is under the control of the privileged elite of the Inner Party, a party and government that persecutes individualism and independent thinking as "thoughtcrime", which is enforced by the "Thought Police". George Claeys in *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* links the rise of dystopian novels to the failures of totalitarian regimes. According to Claeys, the era of the dystopian novel encompassed visionary narratives of the so called utopias that turned into dystopias through their obsession with control (qtd in Gidley 41). Al- Jabouri in his *Milestones on the Road to Dystopia* calls *Nineteen Eighty Four* as “a totalitarian world without escape”.

The Forbidden Country like in *Nineteen Eighty Four* is ruled by a totalitarian regime headed by General and his clone brothers. The General and his ancestors rise to power by suppressing all dissent against their authority. The invention of clone technology by General’s ancestors leads to the birth of General and his clone brothers who effectively

terrorize the people into submission of their rule and authority. Each territory is ruled by General and his clone brothers who are “all continuously radio linked in some way” (Padmanabhan 31). The General’s mandate runs throughout the country. Those who supported and sided with the General’s rule are awarded with “ incentive schemes, safe havens, protected water supplies, unlimited food stocks and sophisticated treatments to pre-empt radiation sickness” (Padmanabhan 305) and those who oppose his rule had “No warnings, no shelters, no hope” .

In *Nineteen Eighty Four* the party uses propaganda for political control as well as to control what people think or do. The protagonist of the novel Winston Smith works under the Ministry of Truth responsible for creating propaganda. The protagonist works in the Records department which is responsible for destroying the records of the past as they become inconsistent with the ever changing policy and substituting falsified records in their place. According to Mansour Khelifa in *George Orwell's Dystopian World. "Nineteen Eighty-Four" and the Pragmatics .of (Mis) Understanding* , “ In a self appointed totalitarian system of the government supported by the arbitrary ideology of “ newspeak, double think and the mutability of the past” (26) truth must deliberately and consensually be transvestied and prevaricated” (2). The General’s regime like in Orwell’s novel uses propaganda to spread misinformation as well as to manipulate the truth. The General’s massive propaganda and destruction of all literature from the past are responsible for the collective amnesia of the masses under the General’s rule who have no idea about the Time Before. The “Time Before” is used to designate the time period before the rise of Generals. One of the character named pigeon admits to have no knowledge whatsoever of the past, “We three for instance- we don’t know what it was like before the Change- so we don’t worry about what it might be like if we created another Change” (Padmanabhan 263). The only available literatures are the manuals published by the General for the citizens. Manuals like *A Manual for Bold Soldiers*,

The Annals, The Thoughts, The Generals: A Plural Life propagandize General's vision and obfuscate and manipulate events and truths from the past or from the Time Before. The General's totalitarian regime is characterised by an absence of women. The General and his ancestors commit genocide by killing all women in the Forbidden Country. Women or vermin as the General calls them are effectively eliminated by the General and his totalitarian mechanism because they believe women to be weak and intellectually inferior. In his manual *The Vermin Tribe: An Analysis* the General says "The drones are what the vermin tribe should have been: servile, dumb and deaf". General's propaganda serves to foster the belief in his subjects that women are "vermins" and "drones" who aren't required in the world anymore. Moreover the General's regime is characterised by a belief in a technologically and scientifically advanced society, homosexuality and collective ethic. Words like woman, sister, mother, God are banned from the vocabulary for being remnants of a past which is corrupted. Clone technology is invented by General's ancestors which replaces female reproduction. Mothering, nurturing and gestation have no relevance in the Forbidden Country as they are believed to be effete concepts which are replaced by the much superior clone technology. The clone technology is invented with the intent of preventing contamination by only using the blood specimen of men for producing offspring as Eldest one of the characters in the novel explains, "Indeed it is about the continuance in the highest and most refined form: relieved of the contamination of dual parentage. There is no reason to fear eventual degeneration and race annihilation." (Padmanabhan 73). The propaganda spread by the General often praised the superiority of clone technology. In his manual *The Generals: A Plural Life* the General states: "We took the Mother out of Nature". The manuals served to foster the belief that female reproduction was something contaminated by its very nature compared to clone technology.

The lies and misinformation spread by the General's regime have a palpable effect on the citizens who have only access to General's manuals. The General's propaganda seeks to keep the citizens in ignorance by denying them the truth surrounding the past. Due to General's massive propaganda, there is an aura of secrecy, incredulity and mystery around the past as Bamboo one of the citizens says: "It's hard to believe what we are told about the Time Before..." (Padmanabhan 241). The General's views on women are imposed on the masses leaving them with a distorted concept of a woman which is evident in the remarks of Pigeon who says: "What's the need for a specialized breed just to give birth to men, any more than there's a need for specialized limbs for climbing trees or chopping woods?" (Padmanabhan 242). This is further evident in the remarks made about women by Blackson who says, "I was told a different tale altogether. When I grew up, it was said that once upon a time there was a race distinct from Man and that race was known as "Wi-Men". The sole purpose of the Wi-Men was to bear children. They were small and dim witted, incapable of caring for their needs outside their home and obliged to seek the constant protection and supervision of men" (Padmanabhan 243). The lies, misinformation, propaganda spread by the General's regime curbs any dissent by keeping the citizens in a state of ignorance as the General says "ignorance is power".

Panoptic surveillance is another feature of Orwellian dystopia. Surveillance mechanisms are widely used by totalitarian regimes to police individuals and suppress any dissent. The development of a technology with the dual capacity for broadcasting and receiving—propaganda and surveillance—is hailed as a turning point in the history of state power as explained in a passage from the novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* :

With the development of television, and the technical advance which made it possible to receive and transmit simultaneously on the same instrument, private life came to an end. Every citizen, or at least every citizen important

enough to be worth watching, could be kept for twenty-four hours a day under the eyes of the police and in the sound of official propaganda, with all other channels of communication closed (Orwell 259).

The term “Big Brother is watching you” is derived from the novel. The Big Brother is an elusive mysterious figure whose existence is doubted, even if the Big Brother does not exist, the image of Big Brother works in a way to persuade the belief that he is watching. The security and surveillance measures employed by General in *Escape* are with the intention of disciplining his subjects and also for rooting out any delinquencies. The General uses a number of tools like surveillance orbs, satellites, data records, Boyz or General’s equivalent of police force for this purpose.

Therefore the dystopia in *Escape* can be aptly described as Orwellian. As in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* the dystopia is characterised by intense government control and subjection.

Surveillance Mechanisms in *Escape*

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault uses an adaptation of Jeremy Bentham’s idea of the panopticon to demonstrate the impact that constant surveillance has not only on an individual, but also on society as a whole. The panopticon is a prison design; a cylindrical building where inmates are invisible to one another, but are all visible to a guard station in the centre of the building. Guards however will not always be observing each inmate to check they are behaving and following the rules. The point of the panopticon is that control is achieved through what Foucault calls 'disciplinary power', a form of power that is constant, unnoticeable and internalised. As inmates are not sure whether they are being watched at any one time, they must always act in accordance to the rules. Control is thus achieved through self-surveillance as the fear of being caught breaking the rules keeps them in line with expectations. Foucault saw panopticism as present in many institutions, not just the prison

system. Institutions such as asylums, schools, military and secret services also adopt a panoptic way of disciplining, with constant surveillance acting to maintain control of those within them.

The totalitarian regime headed by the General uses a number of surveillance tactics to discipline individuals. His primary surveillance mechanism is his permanent guard of three hundred young men known as “the Boyz”. The Boyz changed every two months and was also responsible for the General’s security and well being. 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. The Boyz did surveillance by conducting tours on their motorbikes looking for potential delinquents and also accompanied General in his inspection of the estates. The citizens of Forbidden Country fear Boyz. The prospect of being caught by Boyz while committing any crimes is a source of fear to the citizens. They try to avoid the boy warriors who harass them. The fear and anxiety is evident in the words of gypsy who warns Youngest about the coming of Boyz, “There is a company of boy warriors headed this way”. Another character Windseeker too is afraid of Boyz who routinely catch and intercept him for information as he tells Youngest, “When they catch us. Sometimes, we tell them what they wish to know. Sometimes we don’t. And sometimes we deliberately feed them lies that cause them to slip in their own excrement and taste their own filth” (Padmanabhan 134)

The General made use of satellites to monitor the movements of individuals. These satellite records are maintained and monitored by the Boyz. It is not possible to evade the General’s vision as “the satellites can zoom in on the pearl drop in your ear, but only if they know where to look- and of course, they won’t even be interested in looking unless our General tells them to” (Padmanabhan 48). The General also creates “a database that accounts

for every sentient being in our domain” which is updated every twenty four hours for monitoring and surveillance purpose.

Modern equipments like Dynamic Surveillance Orbs are used for surveillance. The orb was a vehicle equipped to climb up the sides of buildings like a giant spider, prying at will into the lives of residents. Each one had two Boyz inside, patrolling the city day and night, looking for law breakers and potential dissidents, taking pictures and recording conversations. Budget, the administrator of the city, is in praise of orbs for its ability to reduce crimes, “In the early days they caught atleast ten offenders every day...but two years after the machines were brought in, convictions plunged. And now?... Down to nil. An amazing achievement” (Padmanabhan 351).

The surveillance mechanisms prevailing in the Forbidden Country have not only resulted in “zero vagrancy and negligible violent crime” as claimed by the General but also a suppression of healthy dissent and rebellion which is not possible in a totalitarian society.

Discipline and individuals in *Escape*

Disciplinary mechanisms like surveillance are meant to discipline individuals and produce a docile body. Even though the General succeeds to a large extent in suppressing dissent and rebellion, the surveillance mechanism fails to produce disciplined individuals or docile bodies completely. The internalisation of norms and self policing leads to a homogeneous society where everyone thinks alike. According to Sara Mills in *Routledge Critical Thinkers : Michel Foucault* “A further problem which can be seen in the description of disciplinary regimes is that the individual subject is seen to be subjected to the point where resistance to these practices and procedures is futile, so ingrained are they in individuals themselves” (44). The self policing by citizens has even made the role of Boyz defunct, “ it was not uncommon for whole groups of Boy warriors to fall prey to murderous infighting. There was so little for them to do, so few transgressors against the General’s regime, that they

had lost their edge as a fighting unit” (Padmanabhan 323). The fear of being caught by the General for doing any crimes leads the citizens to self police themselves. For instance, Pigeon rebuffs Youngest’s suggestion to take over the estate following the estate owner’s death as “The penalty for peasants doing estate work is a long slow death. That’s what I’ve heard. And in spite of all that has happened here, I’m not yet ready for death” (Padmanabhan 238). The fear of surveillance is evident in Pigeon as he even questions the well meaning intentions of Youngest whom he fears may even be a spy of the General as he says “And who are you to us? Nobody. A stranger. For all I know you’re one of the General’s spies, come to test us-” (Padmanabhan 239). The Same fear is evident in Blackson, another Estate worker who rejects Youngest’s suggestion because of his fear of General as “The General’s Boyz come every week” (Padmanabhan 237).

The novel abounds in cases where surveillance mechanisms have failed to produce disciplined individuals. The biggest example of the failure of General’s security and surveillance mechanism is the existence of Meiji, the sole surviving girl in General’s Brotherhood or the Forbidden Country which has claimed to have successively eliminated all women from the country. Harboring a woman or a girl is a grave crime in Forbidden Country which even resulted in the death of those who provided shelter. Meiji is brought up in the estate by four of her guardians who covertly defy General’s surveillance mechanism to protect and guard her. Despite the manifold inspections conducted by General and his Boyz in the estate, the presence of Meiji is concealed to the surveillance team. Despite the high effectiveness of the surveillance orbs claimed by the General and Budget, the orbs fail to figure out the real identity of Meiji who conceals her identity as a girl.

Even though General makes use of modern equipments to spy and track individuals, counter technologies are invented to evade surveillance. For instance, Youngest finds a way to evade even General’s satellites. Middle, Meiji’s guardian invents a vehicle which “uses

bio-mimicry technology adopted from chameleons” (Padmanabhan 50) which can conceal even the existence of the vehicle making it impossible for the General’s satellite to detect the vehicle.

In some cases the security and surveillance mechanisms fails to instil discipline, self policing and fear in individuals. There are cases when the estate owners despite their allegiance to General have secretly harboured and nurtured women or girls despite this being an act of treason. It is revealed by Bamboo, one of the estate workers that the estate owner he once worked had harboured “a little child” and her “female generator” who were “skewered on bayonets” when found by the General. Moreover, for the transgression “the owners were made to pay impossible compensations, their lands were parcelled out to other estates” (Padmanabhan 246). The General himself recounts one such incident to Meiji’s guardians when he had discovered “an ugly little wretch” of eight years old who was protected by her grandfather in an estate. All this suggests that the surveillance mechanisms prevailing in the Forbidden Country are not a complete success as it is claimed to be.

Conclusion

Surveillance mechanisms in the dystopia of *Escape* are primarily meant to discipline individuals and force them into accepting General’s dictates. The totalitarian regime headed by the General uses a number of traditional surveillance measures as well as sophisticated modern equipments which can easily pry on the private lives of individuals. Even though the surveillance measures largely remain a success there still remains “resistance in hidden corners of the land” against the General’s rule.

Works Cited

- Abrahms, M.H., Geoffrey Galt Harpham. "utopias and dystopias". *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th ed. 2012. Print.
- Al- Jabouri, Firas A J. *Milestones on the Road to Dystopia: Interpreting George Orwell's Self Division in the 'Era' of Force and Proud*. Newcastle : Cambridge Scholars Publishing,2014. Print.
- Ferrara, Mark S. "Utopian and Dystopian Fiction". *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*. Ed. Brian Shaffer. Vol 1. U.K : Wiley Publishing, 2011. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. NY: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Gidley, Jennifer M. *The Future: A Very Short Introduction*. U.K: Oxford UP, 2017. Print.
- Gordon, Collin, ed. *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings (1972-77) by Michel Foucault*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. Print.
- Khalifa,Mansour. *George Orwell's Dystopian World. "Nineteen Eighty-Four" and the Pragmatics .of (Mis) Understanding*. Germany: German National Library, 2015. Print.
- Mathur, Suchitra. "A Patriarch's Guide to Survival: Manjula Padmanabhan's Escape and the Politics of Protectionism". *Muse India* 72 (2017): n. pag. Web. 13 May 2017.
- Mills, Sara. *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Michel Foucault*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty Four*. New Delhi: Finger Print Classics, 2017. Print.
- Padmanabhan, Manjula. *Escape*. India: Picador, 2008. Print.
- . *The Island of Lost Girls*. India: Hachette, 2015. Print.
- Russell, Elizabeth. "Escape/ Landscape/ Genderscape : No futures for Women". *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives*. Ed. Monica Germana, Aris Mousoutzanis. NY: Routledge, 2014. 104-110. Print.

Sargisson, L. *Fool's Gold? : Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century*. US: Palgrave

Macmillan, 2012