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REINTERPRETING "BETI BACHAO, BETI PADHAO": THE 'EDUCATED' DAUGHTER AND INTERGENERATIONAL REPARATION IN MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S *ESCAPE* AND *THE ISLAND OF LOST GIRLS*

REINTERPRETANDO "BETI BACHAO, BETI PADHAO": LA HIJA 'EDUCADA' Y LA REPARACIÓN INTERGENERACIONAL EN ESCAPE Y THE ISLAND OF LOST GIRLS DE MANJULA PADMANABHAN

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* to explore the equation between daughterhood and education, with a special focus on the entanglement of the parental figures in such an equation. In the two novels, the trajectories of Meiji and her uncle(s), especially Youngest, later revealed to be her biological father, offer the scope of such an inquiry. The article reflects on the question of formal education that shapes Meiji's daughterhood in relation to the parental figures in the novels. Moreover, the study deciphers the significant reverberations of corporeal knowledge in Padmanabhan's writings, a subversive narrative trope that is normatively eliminated in the shaping of daughter-father

relationships, especially in the Indian context. It also traces the trajectory of the educated daughter towards intergenerational reparation, a trajectory that is congruent with the question of *hope* as a form of resolution in a critical dystopia. Such discussions about *the educated daughter* also relate to the novel of education or *Bildungsroman* as a genre, reconfigured through genre-blurring as a measure for writings of critical dystopia. In doing so, the article juxtaposes *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (BBBP), or Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter, initiative within the Indian socio-political context with the content of the novels where the interfaced education of the *beti* (daughter) and *the beti's* father becomes significant. Apart from the concepts of *critical dystopia* and *Bildungsroman*, the study finds resolutions in theories of *sensuous knowledge* and *intergenerational reparation*.

KEYWORDS: Bildungsroman, Critical Dystopia, Education, Intergenerational Reparation, Hope

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza *Escape* y *The Island of Lost Girls*, de Manjula Padmanabhan, para explorar la ecuación entre la condición de hija y la educación, con especial atención al entrelazamiento de las figuras parentales en dicha ecuación. En ambas novelas, las trayectorias de Meiji y de su(s) tío(s), en especial Youngest, posteriormente revelado como su padre biológico, abren el campo para tal indagación. El artículo reflexiona sobre la cuestión de la educación formal que configura la condición de hija de Meiji en relación con las figuras paternas/parentales en las novelas. Además, el estudio descifra las importantes resonancias del conocimiento corporal en la escritura de Padmanabhan, un tropo narrativo subversivo que suele eliminarse normativamente en la configuración de las relaciones hija-padre, especialmente en el contexto indio. Asimismo, traza la trayectoria de la hija educada hacia la reparación intergeneracional, trayectoria congruente con la cuestión de la esperanza como forma de resolución en una distopía crítica. Estas discusiones sobre la hija educada se vinculan también con la novela de formación o *Bildungsroman* como género, reconfigurado mediante la difuminación de géneros como recurso en las escrituras de la distopía crítica. En este sentido, el artículo yuxtapone la iniciativa *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (BBBP), *Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter* ["Salva a la hija, educa a la hija"], en el contexto sociopolítico indio, con el contenido de las novelas, donde adquiere relevancia la educación interrelacionada de la *beti* y del padre de la *beti*. Además de

los conceptos de distopía crítica y *Bildungsroman*, el estudio halla vías de resolución en las teorías del conocimiento sensorial y de la reparación intergeneracional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Bildungsroman, Distopía Crítica, Educación, Reparación Intergeneracional, Esperanza.

Introduction

In India, the *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* was a significant aspect of an election manifesto that won the nation's mandate in 2014. In 2015, this campaign became a flagship scheme which sought to "address the declining Child Sex Ratio and related issues of women empowerment over a life-cycle continuum," as stated on the BBBP website by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*, or Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter, as a slogan and a welfare programme indicates the precarity implicit in the birth of a girl-child in India and measures, through which this precarity may be addressed. The enabling mechanisms sought to provide a woman, the saved girl-child with skill-enhancements that would translate into financial and related forms of empowerment. This may also be interpreted as the state machinery's attempt to discourage female foeticide and infanticide with the incentive that the saved daughter can then be turned into a familial asset by her education and other related skills. As such, the question of a female-child's rights, especially her right to life, remains inexorably enmeshed in her filial significance.

This welfare campaign is not the sole invocation of the *daughter-rhetoric* for issues of women's empowerment in Indian politics, especially in the present century. The mass protests that emerged in the wake of 2012 South Delhi gang-rape and murder elicited similar responses. Among other names such as Nirbhaya used to conceal the name of the rape-victim, *India's daughter* gained a lot of traction. The widespread outrage at this incident was also determined by the social factors that configured victimhood. India's Daughter was a professionally qualified, upper-caste individual, her social status further validated by her belongingness to a normative family structure. This further substantiates the issue of women's rights in India being contingent upon daughterhood, filiality and education. Such implications are further problematised when the National Crime Records Bureau Report 2023 reported a rise in crime against women and children as published in several reputed news outlets such as *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*, etc. The report also categorises domestic violence by husbands and other relatives

stemming from demands of dowry as the most common factor in crimes against women in present-day India ("Dowry Cases").

Remarkably, discourses of criminality against the rights of women including the girl child have a direct bearing on novels like *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* (hitherto mentioned as *Island*). *Escape* depicts a dystopian world ruled by the clone brothers referred to as the Generals who have eliminated almost all women. Meiji, the lone surviving girl-child, is secretly raised by her three uncles, Eldest, Middle, and Youngest, who keep her on puberty blockers to conceal her female body from both the world and from Meiji herself. As the assigned General ruling over their territory grows suspicious, Youngest and Meiji, embark on a perilous journey to escape the dystopian land. Their journey continues in *Island* where Youngest helps Meiji escape to Vane Island, an all-female community consisting of girls from different socio-cultural backgrounds undergoing physical and psychological healing. Youngest becomes a transsexual, named Yasmine, as forced by the General and to save Meiji. In an interview, Padmanabhan reveals that *Escape* "was attempting to address the atrocious abuse of women in India – which includes female infanticide and the practice of dowry murder" (Mittal 3). Daughterhood is particularly ensnared in both these atrocious practices, especially as dowry, the wealth that a daughter is required to bring from her natal home to her marital home, often legitimizes the killing of a daughter to lessen the burden on the father, the breadwinner in the traditional family structure. When a daughter's life or birth is perceived as a problem that is to be resolved either through death or through financial measures, the education of the daughter becomes redundant. Yet, a scheme like *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*, created around the time Padmanabhan's novels were written, conflates a woman's life with her education, and more specifically, implicates her life and her education within the confines of daughterhood.

The current study uses the concept of critical dystopia to reflect on Padmanabhan's duology by focusing on the discourse on women's education and empowerment in the Indian socio-political context. The strict distinction between eutopia (good place) and dystopia (bad place) began to blur noticeably with Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* (1986). Describing the utopian text emerging from the politics of 1960s and 1970s America, Moylan coined the term *critical utopia*. This opened up the space for exploring the possibility of critical dystopia by scholars such as: Penley (1986) who was one of the earliest to use the term *critical*

dystopia to describe dystopian fiction that are more critical of the present than others; Cavalcanti in her 1999 dissertation analysed western feminist dystopian fiction from the lens of critical dystopia; and Raffaella Baccolini (2000) explored the blending of genre and gender in dystopian fiction. In 1994 Lyman Tower Sargent popularised the term "critical dystopia" while providing a taxonomy of utopian literature (which includes dystopian fiction as a sub-genre). Taking the definition provided by Sargent, and expanding the ideations of aforementioned critics Moylan developed the concept in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000). His focus was on western dystopian texts emerging within the political climate of the 1980s and 1990s (Moylan xii). Ildney Cavalcanti observes common characteristics discussed by these critics regarding critical dystopia, of which three elements are relevant to the current study. The first is "the co-existence of both utopian and dystopian traces in the works analyzed" (Cavalcanti 68), an aspect connected to the other elements. The second element is the "cognitive mapping of historical evils," balanced by a "textually inscribed counter-narrative move of resistance": the "historical evils" are depicted mainly through the dystopian setting, countered by a narrative of resistance. In that, the critical dystopias "resist both hegemonic and oppositional orthodoxies (in their radical and reformist variants)" (Moylan and Baccolini 190). This is significant to the current study, as it helps unsettle the conflation of the beti's education with empowerment and resistance to patriarchy. The third aspect is "a high degree of textual self-reflexivity that strongly relies on genre self-awareness, genre blurring as well as other shared metafictional strategies" (68). Scholars like Baccolini find in "some structural generic intersections themselves...the loci of opposition as well as the opening of utopian element" (67).

Notably, Padmanabhan's duology has received significant critical attention as dystopian fiction and has been, in recent studies, contextualized to the concept of critical dystopia. Among these studies, Suparno Banerjee (2020) focuses on the notion of space in *Escape* through the lens of critical dystopia (138). Yeole and Moulick (2024) explore the depiction of the female protagonist, Meiji, in *Escape* (16). Basu and Tripathi (2023) expand their research to include *Escape*'s sequel, *The Island of Lost Girls*, interpreting the novels as disrupting the notion of "woman" through a postmodern lens (37). Mittal (2024) and Jha and Satapathy (2025) explore Meiji as a posthuman subject. The current study explores the conflicting equations between women's education and women's empowerment. Locating the texts in the liminal space between critical dystopia and Bildungsroman, the article

questions whether a daughter's education is contingent on the education of her parental figures as educators.

This entails an inquiry into how Padmanabhan explores the equation between daughterhood and education, with a special focus on how the parental figure(s) becomes embroiled in the complexities of this equation. In the two novels, the trajectories of Meiji and her uncle(s), especially Youngest, later revealed to be her biological father, offer the scope of such an inquiry. The first section of the article looks into the question of formal education that shapes Meiji's daughterhood in relation to the parental figures in the novels. The second section deciphers the significant reverberations of corporeal knowledge in Padmanabhan's writings, a subversive narrative trope that is normatively eliminated in the shaping of daughter-father relationships, especially in the Indian context. The third section traces the trajectory of the educated daughter towards intergenerational reparation, a trajectory that is congruent with the question of *hope* as a form of resolution in a critical dystopia. Deviating from the previous studies, we seek to explore *Escape* and *Island* as a bildungsroman not only for the educated *beti* but also the *beti's* father, reconfiguring the genre-blurring proclivities of critical dystopia.

The *Beti*, Her Father(s) and her Education

The 2025 "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Operational Manual", issued by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), "[a]wareness activities with parents/families to better understand the value of girls and their needs". The programme promotes educated *betis* as value-added resources for parents' "old-age security". This suggests an instrumental understanding of *beti,* valued for the benefits she may deliver to society which comprises her family rather than as an equal rights-bearing subject. Even the ostensibly empowering measures such as "Self-Defence Training for girls in government schools" also risk repositioning her body as a site of normative value that needs protection (MWCD). These elements incentivise *beti's* education as a useful resource for one's family, community and nation. But it frames the *beti* less as an autonomous subject with agency and more as a bearer of socially legible value.

One wonders whether there can be an alternative to the value-added rhetoric of women's education and empowerment promoted by BBBP. Sara Hlupekile Longwe, an African feminist, distinguishes education for "self-reliance," which she terms "schooling," from "education for empowerment" (23). Traditional schools may offer the "basis for improving ... [women's]

overall position in society" (Longwe 19). Yet Longwe argues that such conventional education is often founded on patriarchal structures, and may therefore assimilate women into patriarchy rather than liberate them. She terms this process "schooling for subordination" rather than "advancement" of women (19). BBBP likewise promotes formal education and skill development as routes to the advancement of girls in society. If one extends Longwe's critique of conventional schooling, BBBP's emphasis on formal education may risk *schooling* girls *for subordination*. For Longwe, however, "schooling for subordination" is markedly different from "education for empowerment," (23). First, "education for empowerment" must teach girls to "think and work collectively with others, instead of working as an individual to compete against others" (25). BBBP does appeal to collective community mobilisation for social change; yet, whereas Longwe foregrounds collective women's movement, BBBP primarily urges families to allow the girl child to pursue formal education and skill development. Second, Longwe insists that girls must learn to "question the social political environment" and recognise the need for structural change (25). BBBP, by contrast, leans on behavioural training of families and communities so that girls may be sent to school. Yet it also foregrounds the girl child's value to the family/community, thereby reorienting gender exploitation in a covert form. That is, even when BBBP gestures toward social change, the rhetoric it uses to persuade the community risks reasserting patriarchal structures rather than transforming them.

Now, these debates around women's education, *empowerment* and *schooling*, the ways in which these ideas coincide or overlap with each other may be further explored through Padmanabhan's novels. This section analyses how the narratives depict the formal education of a daughter in relation to her advancement. In *Escape*, the formal education of the daughter for so-called *empowerment* is complicated when parental intentions are examined. Youngest questions Middle—"you have persevered with [Meiji's] education. Isn't there a hope...that it will not all go to waste?" (14). This illustrates that a daughter's education serves more to validate the parents' ideals than to equip her for autonomy. In *Island*, the members of the ostensibly safe haven, the Vane Island, for beaten battered girls debate over Meiji's admission. Some of them praise her virginity as a "precious jewel" (147), while others condemn her as "human scum" due to her race (148), reflecting their hypocrisy. This proves that formal education or training is often less about fostering individual autonomy than about how individuals can be integrated into one's family, community and/or nation.

Ironically, Meiji's formal education includes censorship of certain knowledge. In *Escape*, there are mirrors "fixed just above [Meiji's] head height" (19). Here, the educators render Meiji's body a taboo, radically separating her from her identity. This symbolises the crux of Meiji's curricular education— an intellect and body divide. In consequence, this divide splits her identity into Mister Froggie and Mister Piggie, as named by her. Mister Froggie speaks of bodily experiences such as the "horribly awful" man who tried to assault her. Mister Piggie reflects on Meiji's lesson of the day, such as the words taught on the "Word list day" (7). The animal metaphors imply her intuition of being different from men, and her choice of the masculine title "Mister" reveals dependence on the limited/limiting patriarchal vocabulary allowed to her. Meiji is systematically denied any literature or knowledge about women. The brothers claim this deliberate omission is to protect Meiji from psychological harm. But the reluctance of Eldest and his brothers to directly speak of Meiji's puberty evinces that they withhold corporeal information from Meiji to avoid their discomfort. This highlights the reality of Indian society, where the female body is often associated with shame shame, leading to a lack of information and awareness about women. This demonstrates the enmeshed epistemic and psychological violence inflicted upon Meiji by her uncles.

Such restriction on knowledge continues in *Island*, where scarred female bodies are celebrated but the associated traumatic memories erased. Meiji's memory erasure does not resolve her trauma. Instead, the violence Meiji experiences in *Escape*—the systematic denial of knowledge about her female body—resurfaces in *Island*. She refuses to see herself or any woman naked, yet is forced to strip as a gesture to celebrate her body. Such a premature process of self-acceptance seems to be counterproductive for Meiji. Unlike other girls on the Island, who bear visible scars as survivors of gendered violence, Meiji's body carries no such marks, and her conscious memory carries no trauma which isolates her from forming meaningful bonds with other girls. This suppression of memory, combined with the coercive demand for bodily acceptance, constitutes both epistemic and psychological violence. Such violence differs only in form, not function, from the earlier erasure of female bodily knowledge in *Escape*. The patriarchal script impinges upon the autonomy of the *beti* by distinguishing between knowable and unknowable.

Meiji remains unaware of her history but, in the technocratic dystopia where the General has eradicated history, the brothers or Meiji's uncles and father often relate her to the past. Middle has Meiji memorised an

ancient, obsolete dictionary where "nine-tenths of the words are empty sounds now" (*Escape* 4). His insistence on lost languages signals his desire to preserve the past with Meiji being its repository. Eldest is not involved in Meiji's daily education. He regrets never resisting the General, saying they were "bred for cowardice" (27). For him Meiji's existence is a form of resistance, which is possibly a compensation for his earlier failure to act. Youngest imagines teaching Meiji about her changing body based on his memory of women. This implies that Youngest conflates the knowledge of women and the lived reality of women based on his memory. Hlupekile argues that education becomes *empowering* only when it enables women to bring about meaningful social change. Meiji's education by her uncles often ties her to the past, instead of equipping her to affect changes for future. In *Island*, Meiji's training on the female-centred Island seems, at first, to offer *empowerment*. She rides Noor, the genetically modified whale with whom she integrates, in full harmony. This symbolizes Meiji's vision of a society where human-animal integration involves collaboration instead of control. Meiji's agency is shut down when Vane, the Island's maternal authority, punishes Meiji by making her watch Noor's death, for she "allowed him to do what he, a mere animal, wanted to do" (274). The Island's pedagogy redirects her into obedience, preserves hierarchies, instead of reworking them. Meiji is *schooled*, in Hlupekile's terms, into repeating patriarchal structures of control, instead of changing them.

Moreover, Meiji's future is left to Youngest, whose formal education and technical training let him profit within the same patriarchal system that confines her. Youngest first seems empathetic, more willing to explain than Middle, but his patriarchal education soon reinstates authority over Meiji. As the narrative progresses, he repeats the control he once condemned—paralysing Meiji, using her as bait to secure resources in Swan's estate to continue their journey. Youngest becomes the educated paternal guardian who saves and manages the girl child, but not her autonomy. Furthermore, formal education as a means to enlighten and transform society has been rendered insufficient in *Island* as well. Youngest takes his nineteen-year-old "well-read" daughter (*I*64) to the Island, hoping to protect her from the General. This turns the Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter motto into its paradox: Educate the Daughter, Yet Save the Daughter. Meiji's education gives her no protection from being objectified at the Collectory, where female officers examine her body before she is auctioned to the Island. Youngest, despite his education, also takes part in her commodification.

Canonical, book-based knowledge remains insufficient for grasping socio-moral complexity.

Thus, in *Escape,* Meiji's guardians discipline and limit her body to safeguard her. In the sequel, Vane Island, founded ostensibly to care for and heal abused girls, gradually emerges as a space of tacit control rather than uncomplicated refuge. Formal education and skill development as a means to *empower beti* is rendered insufficient in the novels.

The *Beti,* Her Father and Their Bodies

BBBP's official page has its motto, *Beta Beti, Ek Samaan,* meaning Son and Daughter are equal (PMO). Such a motto becomes redundant when issues such as menstruation restrict the movement of *betis* into public spaces. According to *The Times of India* report, dated September 09, 2023, Indian girls miss school or abandon education altogether after menarche due to infrastructural failures and social prejudices (Jaiswal). The erasure of body, especially the female body and its functions, from the formal education system in India becomes evident in such a report. This section evaluates the ways in which Padamanabhan engages with bodily knowledge, both for the *beti* and her father/educator, in her novels of education.

Shotwell's conceptualisation of "sensuous knowledge" is pertinent here. Shotwell recognises that "[t]he importance of our bodily comportment is highlighted perhaps when we step outside "normalcy"" (125). Drawing from Avery Gordon, Shotwell explicates that " sensuous knowledge involves pleasures and pains, sensations we can name and ones we have no language for, and ways of being constrained or freed in the world" (Shotwell 127). That is, sensuous knowledge involves sensations which may or may not be defined by language; such knowledge may be bound to both conformity and resistance. Interestingly, "living well involves a socially contingent comfort in one's body" (135). It is "the desire to feel at home in one's body makes a call back to social movements" (127). Such desire for comfort is preceded by discomfort in one's own body— a necessary element for social transformation because it leads individuals to "transform themselves in order to access resources for full human flourishing" (126). This individual transformation shall be analysed in Padmanabhan's dystopian duology through Youngest and Meiji's distinct journeys into public spaces.

Arguably, in *Escape*, Meiji's *sensuous knowledge* emerges whenever she is forced to step outside her comfort zone into the external world. For instance, her uncles bring home a suitor (a man desperately searching for women in the

woman-scarce dystopia) to meet Meiji. When the suitor jumps on her, Meiji does not move because Middle trained her to remain still in such instances. Her compliance reflects a conditioned trust in her guardians. Yet, her involuntary corporeal response—urinating in fear—to the above-mentioned situation indicates her body's instinctive recognition of danger. In this moment, Meiji's sensuous knowledge disrupts the disciplinary knowledge imposed by her uncles, revealing an embodied awareness that later enables her to assert herself.

Consequently, Meiji's sensuous knowledge guides her actions. In *Escape*, her uncles describe puberty vaguely as "growing up" (8) and expect her to choose adolescence while kept on puberty blockers. Despite her blurred understanding, her choice comes from her corporeal encounter with Middle "when he squeezed" and hurt her face, which she hated (83). Her hatred rises from helplessness and powerlessness. Remembering it, Meiji "realized... [that] he could do it" because "he was bigger and taller than [her]" (83). She resolves to grow "taller" (83), marking her wish for hierarchical equality with her guardians and to undo her own powerlessness. In *Island*, Meiji's resistance is bound to the complexity of her corporeal existence. She continues to carry a prosthetic penis in *Island*, attached to her in *Escape* for the concealment and protection of her female body from the male-dominated dystopia. Her ambiguous corporeality becomes a site that destabilises rigid gender categories. Despite the Island's cultural glorification of the female body and womanhood, Meiji refuses to think "of herself as a woman" (206), even as she recognises "she was not man" (120). Her gender-fluid body resists binary classification, opening a space beyond rigid gender norms.

Later, Meiji is seen to actively assert her identity. In *Escape*, when alone, she chooses to look at, touch and understand her body, implying that beyond parental control she begins exploring and reclaiming it. Her process of self-acceptance is suggested by Mister Froggie's disappearance, a figure symbolic of her fragmented identity. The moment marks both the beginning of Meiji's sexual awakening, which is "incredibly subversive," and the beginning of self-acceptance, yet that acceptance is ambiguous, never neat. Her claim of being a monster shifts into self-regard when she compares herself to "transvestite" bodies. She states that "they're not the real thing," adding that everyone admires them, while as the "real thing" she must hide herself (363). Her self-recognition arises at the cost of her prejudice toward other bodies. She reinscribes a hierarchy between "authentic" and "inauthentic" femininity, reproducing the very gendered norms she sought to resist.

Moreover, Meiji's *sensuous knowledge* shifts with the context and her evolving gender identity. In *Escape*, Youngest informs her of "other places where…men and women live together," a place where she will not be treated as a monster (298). This leads to her yearning to be there— a place "other wee-min [that is women] lived" (389). By contrast, in *Island*, her distinctive trauma—difficulty accepting her female body—and her refusal to identify as a woman do not translate into female-solidarity. This proves that as the narrative progresses, her *sensuous knowledge* evolves in tandem with her gender identity—from conformity to a refusal of strict categorisation. Comparatively, in *Escape*, Youngest's journey outside his protected estate with Meiji foregrounds his *sensuous knowledge*. While Meiji's *sensuous knowledge* is observed to emerge with new circumstances, Youngest suppresses his corporeal impulses. He turns aggressive and instructs Meiji, disguised as a young boy, that "[b]oys don't cry" and later kills Swan for sexually assaulting Meiji (186). This reflects Youngest's understanding of emotional suppression and violence as a supposed masculine trait necessary for survival.

In contrast, the tough disciplinarian persona of the father in *Escape* turns mostly into a submissive and compliant survivor in *Island*. The General transforms Youngest into a "transie"— "transsexual in the pleasure industry" (1). Here, sexual abuse functions less as gratification than as an assertion of power through the coerced effeminisation of a man and the denial of his bodily autonomy. This demonstrates that Youngest's suffering and submission make him "a pearl without price" (101) for the General. Youngest's subservience to him for aiding Meiji's escape and survival reflects his knowledge of being vulnerable. This powerlessness makes Youngest a better father because Meiji "was the ultimate leash. And talisman" (15). Unlike in *Escape,* here survival is not related to violence but with self-sacrifice which destabilises the normative fatherhood.

Notably, Youngest struggles with his sexual impulses because of his distorted notion of the female body. In *Escape*, the prohibition on the existence of female bodies has exoticised them. When Youngest "chanced upon the bare skin" of Meiji's thighs, he "repositioned the cloth immediately" and tried shaking off the image of "his hand on her skin" but failed (*Escape* 12). This highlights that exoticisation leads Youngest to oscillate between sexual attraction/objectification of and parental affection for his daughter. Padmanabhan thus suggests that when education and socialisation deny embodied knowledge of women's bodies, desire returns in distorted, destabilising forms. In *Island*, this distorted understanding of the body is

reconfigured when the General forces Youngest to become a transsexual object for his gratification. Youngest undergoes surgical transformation to gain the General's trust, thereby to extricate Meiji from the dystopian Brotherland on the pretext of selling her to the Island. In consequence, Youngest finds it difficult to accept his changed body. For instance, looking down at his breasts, Youngest "felt as though he were outraging the modesty of a woman" (51). This response places Youngest at the intersection of victimhood and patriarchal gaze— even as he is subjected to bodily violation, he views his body through internalised norms of shame. His reaction thus suggests not merely discomfort but denial of his embodied experience and trauma as a transsexual subject, revealing how patriarchal conditioning compels him to mistrust and disavow the knowledge produced by his own body.

In contrast, when Youngest reaches the matriarchal Vane Island, beyond the General's immediate control, his relationship to desire begins to shift. The Island's women try to evoke a sexual response to gather information about his visit by sending a woman named Anita. Unlike the passive femininity Youngest expects, Anita actively seeks pleasure. He initially resists this mode of sexuality because it unsettles his patriarchal assumptions about female desire. This resistance weakens once the General's constant radio transmission—relayed through a chip embedded in Youngest's teeth—is severed by the women of Vane Island, symbolising the disruption of patriarchal surveillance and command. Only after this interruption does Youngest begin to experience pleasure, despite repeated refutations, not as an agent of control but as a recipient of embodied sensation. Although the women deploy sexual pleasure strategically to manipulate him into joining the Island, the encounter enables him to reconnect with his own body, marking a tentative moment of embodied awareness.

Following this sexual encounter Youngest ponders over ethical questions in Island. He calls it "a pleasurable rape"(332), suggesting his emerging understanding of the complexities relating to sexual violence. He questions Vane Island's architecture relying on modified living crabs; engineering a creature "hooked and dependent on pleasure-stimulation in return for its labour" felt cynical to him (369). Youngest links exploitation to his own experience, as it "made him feel... like a variation upon a modified crab" (370). Even so, male conditioning impinges, and he calls these thoughts "sentimental" and/or "unrealistic" (370). This suggests a clash between his patriarchal rationality and sensuous knowledge, yet it also signals his evolving understanding of the world.

To draw these discussions on the *beti,* her father and their bodies to a close, let us return to the aforementioned *The Times of India* report. Jaiswal writes that besides infrastructural flaws, other reasons for girls skipping school during menstruation include "cultural restrictions, teasing, taboo and stigma associated with menstruation at different levels, from home to school". This demonstrates that stigma related to menstruation often begins at home, restricting a girl's mobility into public spaces, such as school. This is reminiscent of the restrictions that are placed around Meiji's adolescent body. Yet, as this section has disclosed, the duology also registers moments of rupture for Meiji through her *sensuous knowledge.* By contrast, Youngest begins unlearning rigid notions of masculinity, while opening to the shared nature of oppression. Hence, the protagonists' *sensuous knowledge* expands their understanding of themselves and the world, often in ambiguous ways. This opens up the possibility of intergenerational reparation, explored in the next section.

Between *Bachao* and *Padhao* (Saving to Educate) or *Padhao* and *Bachao* (Educate but also Save)

The intergenerational reparation becomes necessary as the fissures between policy-making and real-life incidents emerge. Almost a decade after the multiple, and popular awareness campaigns of BBBP like "Selfie With Daughter", the murder of a national tennis player Radhika Yadav by her father who felt humiliated by taunts about living off his daughter's income ("Whole Issue") exposes the vulnerabilities of the educated daughter and the (educated) father. Padmanbhan's dystopia also allows the scope of reflecting on the complexities of a *beti's* empowerment as well as the guardian's conditioned resistance to the society as discussed in preceding sections.

The above question can be better explored through an intermeshing lens of (non)traditional Bildungsroman and critical dystopia. In traditional Bildungsroman, the protagonist matures while integrating into an unchanging society. Non-traditional Bildungsromane, such as the postcolonial Bildungsroman, challenge these conventions. Ericka Hoagland posits, while analysing African literature, that in postcolonial Bildungsroman either the protagonist overcomes the socio-political crisis or is left "even more disenfranchised and disillusioned" (228). In the post-colonial Bildungsroman the individual growth is ambivalent. S. Jain and S. Jha (2025) examine Meiji's unconventional growth in *Escape* as integral to the Bildungsroman. Prioritising Meiji's "embodied subjectivity" over Youngest's, they show how

Padmanabhan challenges traditional Bildungsroman. Deviating from this concern, the present study explores the ambiguous interfaced growth of beti (daughter) and her father.

In traditional Bildungsroman, family is a "symbol of social pact", where "subjective happiness" coincides with the protagonist's "objective socialization" (Morretti 24), underscoring family's role in individuation process. Departing from traditional Bildungsroman, Padmanabhan depicts family as responsible for stunted growth. Bildungsroman concludes with marriage since it is a "'pact' between the individual and world" signifying willful integration between individual and society (Morretti 22). Padmanabhan's duology does not end in marriage which, in the Indian context, is subversive given that *beti*'s education is often equated with finding a prospective husband. Yet the novels conclude with an ambivalent reconciliation between Meiji and her father. Their ambiguous transformation makes the reunion suggestive of partial harmonisation between the individual and society. Thus, the novels do not fully reject the traditional Bildungsroman either. Essentially, the novels blend elements of both traditional and non-traditional Bildungsroman, destabilising and reconfiguring the genre itself. Here, critical dystopia is relevant, as Ildney Cavalcanti notes "genre blurring" as a common strategy within it (68). This transgression enables examining how intergenerational repair becomes essential to foster *hope*, characteristic of critical dystopia, in the novels.

We first explicate Walker's reparative justice, then examine Almassi's extension to intergenerational reparative justice, and finally relate these to *hope* in critical dystopia. We analyse how meaningful communication may begin intergenerational reparation between the *beti* and her father, sustaining hope in Padmanabhan's critical dystopia. Walker's "reparative justice" restores "moral health" between wronged and wrong-doer by addressing "psychological" and "political" conditions (Walker 209). It is "redress for injustice and wrongful harm" that reorders individuals' standing in relation to each other and "their communities" (208). Communication, or "gestures of reparation," comprises "communicative" and "exemplifying" functions (208)— a "vindicatory message" acknowledging "the reality, the wrong, the responsible parties, and their intent to do justice," and "exhibit[ing] the right relationship between" those parties, absent when harm occurred (208). It reflects commitment to rebuilding and sustaining just relationships within communities.

Ben Almassi expands Walker's "reparative justice" to "intergenerational reparative justice" in the context of climate change (199). Though the current

study is not on climate issues, Almassi's concept is crucial here. Almassi proposes three benefits of following Walker's model for intergenerational reparations. First, it is not about masking "injustice or wrongdoing" or urging forgetting, rather, it prioritises "forgiveness" over "forgetting", "contrition" over "compensation" (204). Walker emphasises the victim's "agency and subjectivity" in granting forgiveness or receiving contrition (206); Walker places a great emphasis on the victim's "agency and subjectivity" in providing *forgiveness* or receiving *contrition* for the past wrong-doings (206). In relation to the texts under examination, the focus will be on the restoration of the daughter's agency and subjectivity in confronting her past. The second benefit is similar to what Walker calls *vindicatory message* (interrelated to the *exemplifying function* discussed above), aiming to renew "trust and hope" for restoring "morally healthy cross-generational relationships" (205). The third benefit is the "prioritization of [intergenerational] interdependence and collaboration" necessary for sustained "collective action" (205). This collective action may be related to critical dystopia, which retains hope by opening "a space of contestation and opposition for those collective 'ex-centric' subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule" (Baccolini and Moylan 6). In the novels examined, restored intergenerational interdependence leads to possible collective action.

Remarkably, in the novels, unmasking of past "injustices and wrongdoing" (Almassi 204) initiates the *intergenerational reparative* dialogue/ communication. This *unmasking,* arguably, allows the daughter to reclaim agency and subjectivity. In *Escape*, repair begins when Meiji confronts her parents after Youngest tells her about her birth and mother. She repudiates his glorification of her mother's self-sacrifice, exposes the cruelty of producing a child underground only to abandon it and die "in glory," and asks why her mother ignored the life Meiji would inherit in a world that outlaws her existence (382). Here, she rejects Youngest's idealisation of the female body and interrogates her late mother's sacrificial role. . This confrontation enables Meiji to reflect on her position as a *beti* and on the condition of wronged women in her society, as she declares: "[t]hat person you call my mother was wrong and stupid to have allowed herself to be used. Never, ever will I allow that to happen to me" (382). In this moment, Meiji subverts notions of womanhood tied to sacrifice and self-effacement, breaking parental bequests of violence. Her confrontation and demand for contrition indicates the beginning of psychological repair.

Comparatively, the importance of *unmasking* the past resurfaces in *Island* where female authorities erase Meiji's memory to ameliorate her trauma. This erasure and her exclusion from the Island's clique, as discussed above, leave Meiji with a profound sense of rootlessness and alienation. She demands to remember, suggesting her refusal to be coerced by her guardians, the Island's women. During the memory retrieval process, she recalls two images: a man gripping her face and causing her fear, and the memories of her uncles which are "joyous, unbounded and infinitely loving" (*Island* 352). Despite incomplete recollection, Meiji chooses to remember the memory of love over terror. Though she remembers too little to forgive her parents, her choice to dwell on a positive memory reveals agency and allows "healing every part of her being" (353). While it may suggest *forgetting* or willful ignorance, it also reflects an acceptance of her painful history and a deliberate choice to remember a more loving past.

Moreover, in *Island*, Meiji's partial recovery of memories of her guardians propels her from fear to ambiguous agency. The girls are assigned modified giant lizards to train with, with which they must integrate psychologically and physically to ride. Meiji calls her assigned modified lizard Smaug. After her recollection, Meiji agrees to ride Smaug, while her companion Rham, with a violent, abusive past, withdraws in fear. The difference in their responses suggest their capacity to overcome trauma-- Meiji's memories of her uncles provide her with psychological strength. Although Rham fully recalls her past, Meiji does not, leaving the extent of Meiji's healing ambiguous. Symbolically, the Meiji-Smaug collaboration/integration may question and redefine the normative hierarchical guardian-*beti* relationship. For instance, Meiji encounters and remembers the General as "a dangerous, powerful man ... from whom she always had to be hidden...[s]he wanted to cry out, to warn Smaug to back away from him. But it was too late. The lizard was hypnotised by the man's movements" before the creature killed him (433). On the one hand, Smaug's killing may appear mindless rather than protective; yet Smaug also registers the General as "unnatural" and "distasteful," an instinctive aversion (despite Smaug's affective capacity being limited to hunger) that can be read as her responsiveness to Meiji's lingering trauma. On the other hand, Meiji's choice not to impose control—*she wanted to cry out* but did not—refuses to translate trauma into coercion of Smaug. Thus, the Meiji–Smaug bond displaces the restrictive parental/paternal gaze with a partnership premised on shared intent.

Interestingly, after the *beti's* confrontation in *Escape*, the father seems to evolve while acknowledging past wrongs and attempting reparation by

conveying a *vindicatory message* and exemplifying *the right relationship*. He informs Meiji that international organisations may rescue her but never a man of the dystopian land because they are detested for killing women—a judgment he accepts as "a kind of reverse justice" (391). Such acceptance suggests his *contrition* which is also exemplified through his response when Meiji desires to be in a place inhabited by women: "If that's what you'd like... that's what we will work towards" (209). The word *we* suggests a collaborative attitude rather than the normative hierarchical relationship between parent and daughter. Despite his limited understanding of Meiji's nuanced corporeal experiences, his attempt to take her to a better world reflects his intention to free his daughter from the dystopian land. Youngest's *vindicatory message* is communicated to Meiji through his acknowledgement of wrong and his growth from controlling his daughter's body to one encouraging her self-expression exemplifies *the right relationship*.

Thereafter, *Island* continues with Youngest's attempts to *exhibit the right relationship* with Meiji while trying to protect her from the General. On the one hand, his responsibility is bound up with control, shown when he immobilises Meiji to transport his daughter to the Island. On the other hand, Youngest unwillingly converts himself into a transsexual to rescue Meiji. Youngest's internal contradictions between control and self-sacrifice, suggest that *intergenerational reparation* is not a linear or complete process, but an ongoing one requiring commitment, self-reflexivity, and continual self-transformation.

Consequently, following the reparative communication, the restoration of "trust" and "interdependence" (Almassi 208) between the *beti* and the father may be observed. But in a father-daughter relationship, this rebuilding of *interdependence* risks being hierarchical. In *Escape*, Youngest's attempts to help his daughter flee the dystopian land often blurred the line between protection and control, between collaboration and domination, as discussed. Meiji's declaration, "I won't leave without you!" (*Escape* 392), suggests her apparent overdependence on Youngest. Yet, she follows it with the assertion, "I'll come back to get you!" (392), which inverts the father-daughter equation of protector-protected with Meiji providing hope to her father. It also foregrounds her nascent political articulation because returning to *get* Youngest requires challenging dystopian authority. Thus, their *interdependence* is intrinsically tied to a possible collaborative political action which is the purpose of *intergenerational reparation*.

However, Youngest and Meiji reunite after their separate journeys, and their lingering burdens complicate their interdependent relationship.

Meiji feels uncomfortable looking at Youngest's female body. When asked about his decision to stay with the Island's women, Youngest replies, "I need time... we both need time [to decide]" (*Island* 439)—the hesitant *I* followed by *we* reflects his internal conflict between maintaining control over and recognising autonomy of his daughter. Later, after Meiji requests that Youngest train with Smaug, Youngest stays behind with Meiji, suggesting a collaborative decision. Also, Meiji's "reaching for her father's hand" (443) and drawing it around herself in an embrace suggests that she is redefining her relationship with her father. After Meiji-Smaug kill the General, Youngest, who had been the General's captive, is able to reunite with his daughter and may also begin to heal psychologically. Thus, despite ambiguity, the father–daughter reunion allows them some respite and healing.

Additionally, their reunion on the Island signals collective political action. Youngest agrees to learn riding Smaug, as the lizard needs two riders: a Primary who psycho-physically merges with the lizard, and a Backer who integrates only with the lizard's legs and guides the Primary. Meiji will likely remain the Primary and Youngest the Backer, symbolising a changing equation– daughter's primary agency and father's supportive role. With one clone-General already killed by Meiji–Smaug, Youngest's training suggests the possibility of a partnership between *beti* and father against the clone-Generals' dystopia. Also, the father stays to share information with the Vane Island women to help topple the regime. This points to a potential alliance between Meiji, Youngest, and the Island's women against the dystopian land. Thus, the *beti*–father reunion brings *hope*—for the characters, the narrative's political horizon, and the readers.

As such, this interfaced father-daughter growth becomes relevant to women's empowerment in the contemporary Indian milieu. It offers a critique of the aforementioned murder of tennis player Radhika Yadav by her father. The perpetrator claimed financial security meant Radhika did not need to run a tennis academy, and his relatives taunted him for his financial dependence on the daughter ("Whole Issue"). Meiji and Youngest's collaborative interdependence challenges this father-as-superior, daughter-as-dependent paradigm. In their collaboration, *beti* reclaims agency and questions the status quo, while the father learns to cede control, necessary for the *beti's* empowerment. This highlights the urgency to re-think such initiatives as BBBP, which educates the daughter within normative patriarchal structure and fails to re-educate father/parent into changing patriarchal attitude.

Conclusion

Thus, the reading of Padamanabhan's novels contextualised to the principles of the BBBP programme and the narrative of women's education in India exposes the fallacies in formal education. The article has revealed through textual praxis of fiction and lived realities that education does not necessarily become the currency for empowerment for the Indian women. In fact, an educated but disempowered daughter continues to be jeopardized within the patriarchal social system. This has created exigencies to identify and examine an alternative to the formal education — the sensuous knowledge, for the *beti* and the *beti's* father or parental figure. In the course of this study, it has been attested that not only the *beti* but the *beti's* father/ parent/ educator should unlearn social norms and pursue their individual trajectory of self-education and growth. This allows the reinterpretation of the *bildungsroman* in Padmanabhan's critical dystopia as the interfaced attainment of maturity of the individuals, the daughter and the father, causing the once apprehensive filial bond to partially recuperate. Although this attainment is new and therefore, ambivalent, the hope-quotient of critical dystopia is enacted through intergenerational reparation. The sense of continuity and regeneration implicit in the intergenerationally reparative *bildungsroman* connects the growth of the *beti and* her father, irrevocably, to each other.

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