



Digital Humanities as Catalysts for Cultural Exploration: Analyzing Manjula Padmanabhan's Novels

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Abstract :

The intersection of literature, culture, and technology has given rise to a dynamic field within academia known as Digital Humanities (DH). This research paper delves into the application of Digital Humanities methodologies to analyze the novels of Manjula Padmanabhan, a prominent Indian author whose works have garnered critical acclaim for their deep engagement with cultural themes. Through a comprehensive exploration of Padmanabhan's novels using digital tools and techniques, this study aims to shed light on the intricate tapestry of cultural elements woven into her narratives.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Manjula Padmanabhan, Cultural exploration, Literature analysis, Digital tools.

The contemporary literary landscape is increasingly shaped by technology, offering scholars new avenues for literary analysis and cultural exploration. Digital Humanities (DH) has emerged as a transformative force in this regard, enabling researchers to uncover hidden layers of meaning within texts and investigate the intricate connections between literature and culture. In this research paper, we harness the power of Digital Humanities to examine the novels of Manjula Padmanabhan, a distinguished Indian author whose works provide a rich tapestry of cultural exploration.

Manjula Padmanabhan's novels are notable for their keen observation of the cultural nuances and societal shifts in India. Her narratives often delve into themes such as identity, globalization, gender dynamics, and the clash of tradition and modernity. By employing DH methodologies, this study seeks to analyze these themes in greater depth and illuminate the intricate interplay of culture within her works.

The DH approach adopted in this research includes text mining, sentiment analysis, and network analysis. Text mining allows us to extract and categorize recurring themes, motifs, and cultural references present in

Padmanabhan's novels. Sentiment analysis helps uncover the emotional undertones of her narratives, shedding light on the author's perspectives on cultural aspects. Network analysis enables the visualization of the relationships between characters, events, and cultural elements within the novels.

One of the key objectives of this paper is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's novels through the lens of Digital Humanities. By employing digital tools, we aim to unveil hidden patterns, cultural subtexts, and nuances that may have eluded traditional literary analysis. This approach not only enhances our understanding of Padmanabhan's literary contributions but also demonstrates the potential of DH as a catalyst for cultural exploration in literature.

The dystopian future depicted in Padmanabhan's novels is a horrific projection of modern politics and ecological calamity. Rupali Palodkar has aptly encapsulated the ecofeminist concerns in India by pointing out that men have historically held control of women's bodies and sexualities, as well as of land and the natural world: "Sex-selective abortions are performed on a large scale in India. An alternative to humanity's exploitation of the planet is required and to find a sustainable method of living that wouldn't endanger women's or the planet's existence" (60–61). According to her, this is the reason why female

authors who write about the effects of the degradation of women and the environment, such as Manjula Padmanabhan, are adopting an ecofeminist perspective. The world as it exists today is referred to in the epic as the 'Time Before' which was destroyed in a detonation. Pollution devastated the ecology, causing the ice to melt, the seashores to die, and species to disappear. Identity politics are interwoven in both books with the way conservatives in the Forbidden Country envision a society devoid of women as a result of men's advancements in self-cloning technology and how women are used as commodities by predatory global capitalism to be exploited and consumed. Women in the Zone endure a terribly difficult life since they are dehumanised and treated as booty, trophies, and entertainment. The enormous appeal of spectacles could be seen as a byproduct of the production and consumption patterns of a time when various mechanical instruments, especially drones, are used to keep a close eye on human activity. The dominant class in the Zone uses technology to oppress the less fortunate and weaker members of society, including women, who are in a precarious and vulnerable position as subalterns. According to Sarah Bracke, a resilient subject is one who can withstand the effects of austerity policies while still producing, and subaltern resilience serves as the framework for international economic production and consumption. One such instance is the following quote from a character who was raised in a home

where sex was the norm and was made to perform for the teams: "When I was one year old, my mother gave me to her Big Man to use, and he used me three times before passing me around to his friends. Instead of giving me milk, my mother feeds me narcotics. I give suck to dogs to swine on the platform to give Zone teams a good laugh. After then, the entire family gets fed" (3924).

In order to comprehend the novels more fully, it is important to keep in mind that India has a decreasing sex ratio, primarily due to social prejudice against girls and the improper use of the widely accessible—yet illegal—technology for sex determination in cases of female femicide. Padmanabhan challenges prevailing ideas of male superiority and female genocide and warns readers about the drastic consequences of institutionalised sexism and fascism by posing uncomfortable questions about misogyny, pervasive (trans)sexual violence, and the erosion of civil rights in her dystopian fiction. Surya Monro states that minority gender groups like Hijras, Kothis, intersex individuals, and androgynes are likely to suffer since the default dominance of men and non-transgender persons will not be challenged if strategies focused on erasing gender are pursued. Furthermore, people would not have the option to identify in a sex- or gender-specific manner if degendering were to be implemented in a prescriptive manner.

In the novels, the Estate General is portrayed as a sadist who sees himself as a sculptor who has reshaped reality. His treatment of transgender and cisgender women, who are now extinct, is a sign of the erasure of difference in the nation he despotically leads. As one of many Cloned Generals, he sees only the benefits of total uniformity and sameness, considering distinction and individuality to be bad. In order to get his point across outside of the Forbidden Country, excerpts from a series of interviews conducted by a foreign journalist are put into the first book at regular intervals. The statement, "The existing deficit of females in our world enormously aided our task" (*The Island of Lost Girls*, line 3582) stands out among his many assertions. The National Institution for Transforming India reports that the child sex ratio in India is dropping (900 in 2013–2015 and 906 in 2009–2011). This indicates a significant shortage of girls in a nation where it is frequently forbidden for a girl to be born. Women are hounded or killed for dowries, and so many girls experience discrimination and neglect even after they are born that brides are occasionally forced to be "imported" from the nation's impoverished areas. During an interview with a horrified outside reporter, the General reveals that "we had to euthanize females in order to control breeding technology and to establish the collective ethic and

that females are driven by biological imperatives that lead them to compete for breeding”(*The Island*, line 3582).

According to General, women have been completely eradicated, and it is said that their species has vanished from the Forbidden Country. The regulations even forbid using terms, images, or symbols that are associated with women. The propaganda of the Estate General extols the virtues of clone technology over female reproduction, citing the latter's bodies as supposedly contaminated. Dystopian science fiction frequently addresses the issue of reproduction, which, if cloning is successful, will inevitably lead to a conflict between the sexes and the eradication of one, presuming there are two sexes in the first place—a presumption that is widespread despite the fact that millions of non-binary persons live in India. As evidenced by Pigeon's comments, general's views on women are imposed on the general public, giving them a skewed conception of what a woman is. "What's the need for a specialised breed just to give birth to men, any more than there's a need for specialised limbs for climbing trees or chopping woods?"(*The Island*, line 3368). Blackson continues, saying,

I was told a different tale altogether. It was told to me as a child that there once was a race called 'Wi-Men' that was different from humans.

For the 'Wi-Men', having children was their only goal. They needed the

continual protection and guidance of males because they were little and dim-witted, incapable of taking care of their requirements outside of their home (*The Island*, line 3378).

At first, we might read the books as Meiji's bildungsroman, following her journey from a transgender girl to a cis woman and Youngest's heroic attempt to save his young charge. However, Padmanabhan challenges the strict gender binary and problematizes these figures. Meiji is the only female survivor of the Forbidden Zone, yet despite this, she was raised as a man, clothed like a boy, and was only allowed to be supervised by men. Male hormones have also prevented her from developing normally, keeping her in the blind about her own differences and preventing her from dying if her female

Genitalia were found to exist. However, Youngest, the male lead who tries to save her, gets forced to have a vaginoplasty done for the General's amusement. Since their bodies change as they pursue freedom from the Forbidden Country and arrive on the Island, the two characters must thereby negotiate their own gender identities. Through this story, Manjula Padmanabhan appears to be dedicated to upending heteropatriarchy and the biological norms around womanhood. Readers are cautioned about two of the most significant issues facing modern India: the political ramifications of

femicide combined with technology and the violence and marginalisation against transsexuals. These issues highlight the performative nature and fluidity of gendered and sexual identities in the contemporary global society. As I shall explain in a moment, it is crucial for this reason that the novels' central protagonists are portrayed as existing on both the trans feminine and trans male spectrums.

Meiji's gender identity could be seen as transgender given the facts presented in the story. Meiji is given a synthetic penis to help her feel more comfortable while travelling in danger. The device perfectly matched her skin and the method of its attachment to her pelvic region was so expertly achieved that it looked entirely at home on her body. Meiji is at ease in a boy's physique. She was raised in this manner—always dressing like a boy and being viewed as an effeminate lad by others. Meiji's uncles tell her at sixteen that she is not what you are supposed to be . In order to avoid being seen by onlookers as she flees the Forbidden Country,"We want to help you understand what you need to know in order to become what you must become."*(The Island, line 1156)*. Currently, she is disguising herself as a small boy. The author expresses worry about the social significance of looks and proposes that gender is essentially determined by how one is viewed and acknowledged by others. Meiji is finally

brought to the island, where cis women rule the country in order to safeguard and preserve others. She is perceived as a woman who is oblivious to her "true" gender identity by women. Even though she tells the other rescued women—known as the Candidates—that "I am not the same as you," there is not the least chance in *The Island* that she be identified as non-binary" (*The Island* line 2354). The islanders are unable to see beyond the binary and are worried about her positioning as either a male or a woman. "You called me a... a woman ... I'm not a woman" (*The Island*, line 2387). However, Meiji simultaneously asserts that she is not a guy in response to her classmate Messina's taunt, saying, "Oh! That amusing little sausage hanging between her legs is what it is!" (*The Island* line 2387). Notably, Meiji refuses to adhere to either gender in order to oppose the totalitarian control that the island women endure.

In general terms, the author seems to criticise the multiple dimensions of social inequality that come into establishing a human condition in which the technological apparatus is at the disposal of the ruling classes (either men in the Forbidden Country or women in the Island). The novels analysed in this chapter suggest the implications of this situation by presenting the extent to which those affected by the changes suffer and how they surrender themselves in order to survive, even though eventually they learn to resist and

to make use of their vulnerable condition to join forces and transform their precarious realities. Padmanabhan's fiction appears to draw from her perception of the transformation in the world order due to globalising tendencies.



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