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The Architecture of Absence: Dystopia, Gender, and Power in Manjula Padmanabhan's The Island of Lost Girls

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ABSTRACT

Manjula Padmanabhan's The Island of Lost Girls (2015) represents one of the most sophisticated literary engagements with India's demographic crisis of 'missing women' in contemporary fiction. Published seven years after the companion novel Escape, the text returns to Padmanabhan's characteristic preoccupations—gender, power, survival, and the dystopian extrapolation of existing social tendencies—but deploys them within a new narrative architecture of fragmented chronology, multiple focalisers, and a meditation on memory as both a site of gendered trauma and a resource of feminist resistance. This article offers a comprehensive critical analysis of The Island of Lost Girls, situating it within the intersecting frameworks of feminist dystopian theory, postcolonial studies, and critical geography. The argument proceeds through three interconnected lines of analysis: first, a reading of the novel's construction of 'absence' as an active structural and narrative principle through which gender violence is represented not as sensational event but as pervasive condition; second, an examination of how Padmanabhan uses spatial and geographical tropes—the island, the mainland, the border—to map the topology of patriarchal power and the possibilities of its contestation; and third, an analysis of how the novel constructs female solidarity as both a psychic and a political resource in conditions of extreme oppression. The article argues that The Island of Lost Girls makes a significant contribution to the feminist dystopian canon by developing a distinctive narrative ethics of witness—a mode of attending to gendered suffering that refuses both sentimentalism and desensitisation. The article concludes by situating the novel within the context of contemporary India's ongoing crisis of gender-based violence and the literary and political responses it has generated.

Keywords: Manjula Padmanabhan, The Island of Lost Girls, feminist dystopia, missing women, gender violence, postcolonial feminism, critical geography, narrative ethics, Indian English fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

When Amartya Sen coined the phrase 'missing women' in 1990 to describe the demographic deficit produced by decades of systematic gender discrimination in South and East Asia, he gave statistical form to a violence that had previously circulated largely as local knowledge—the quiet disappearance of daughters through selective abortion, infanticide, inadequate nutrition and healthcare, and the structural neglect that follows from the devaluation of female life. In the years since Sen's intervention, the phrase 'missing women' has become one of the central analytical categories in the study of gender inequality, and its implications have been traced through economics, demography, sociology, and public health. What it has perhaps been less thoroughly traced through is literature—the imaginative forms in which cultures process, contest, and partially understand the violence that statistics can describe but cannot fully encompass.

Manjula Padmanabhan's The Island of Lost Girls (2015) is one of the most sustained and searching literary engagements with the problem of India's missing women. The novel belongs to the speculative dystopian tradition that Padmanabhan has made her own over the course of a career spanning theatre, fiction, comics, and journalism. Like its predecessor Escape (2008), The Island of Lost Girls takes as its premise the extrapolation of existing gender-selective tendencies in Indian society to their logical extreme: a near-future world in which the systematic elimination of girls has produced a society of profound demographic and psychological distortion. But where Escape focuses on the complete elimination of women and the dystopian society that results, The Island of Lost Girls is concerned with a more ambiguous, transitional moment—a world in which the missing girls are not entirely absent but are gathered, segregated, hidden: an island of exceptions to the mainland's logic of elimination.

The novel has attracted some critical attention, but it has not yet received the sustained, book-length analysis it merits. Most existing commentary situates it either in the context of Padmanabhan's overall oeuvre or as an example of South Asian feminist speculative fiction, without pursuing the depth of close reading that its formal complexity and political ambition demand. This article seeks to address that gap by offering a comprehensive critical analysis of the novel that attends simultaneously to its thematic concerns, its narrative strategies, and its political stakes.

The argument proceeds through four principal sections. Section 2 establishes the theoretical and contextual frameworks for the analysis, examining the traditions of feminist dystopia and postcolonial feminism within which the novel operates, and situating it in the context of India's documented crisis of gender-selective violence. Section 3 analyses the novel's construction of 'absence' as both a demographic reality and a narrative strategy. Section 4 examines the novel's geography of power and resistance, focusing on the figure of the island as a complex spatial metaphor. Section 5 explores the novel's treatment of female solidarity and memory as resources of feminist counter-culture. The conclusion situates the novel within the broader landscape of contemporary feminist cultural production and reflects on its significance for ongoing debates about gender, power, and representation.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Postcolonial Feminism and the Literature of Gender Violence

The Island of Lost Girls belongs to a tradition of South Asian feminist writing that has sought to make the gendered dimensions of postcolonial modernity visible and to contest the developmental narratives that have tended to marginalise or depoliticise them. Scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Uma Chakravarti have argued that the postcolonial nation inherits and reconfigures colonial gender hierarchies in ways that reproduce the subordination of women under new political dispensations. The emergent nationalist narrative of progress and development has often been complicit in this reproduction, framing women's subordination as a 'traditional' problem to be solved by modernisation while simultaneously deploying women's bodies as the terrain of cultural identity and national honour.

Padmanabhan's fiction engages with this problematic in a distinctly speculative register. Rather than representing contemporary India directly, she extrapolates its gender politics into a future that reveals their underlying logic. This strategy of speculative extrapolation is itself a form of ideological critique: by showing where existing tendencies lead, she makes visible the violence that is present, in more diffuse and naturalised forms, in the actual world. The Island of Lost Girls participates in this critical tradition while also extending it, using the specific resources of the dystopian form—its capacity for estrangement, its compression of historical processes into individual narratives—to create an encounter with gender violence that is both intellectually penetrating and emotionally immediate.

2.2 The Demographic Crisis of Missing Women

The specific context that The Island of Lost Girls addresses—India's crisis of gender-selective elimination—is both a matter of statistical record and a continuing subject of political controversy. Demographic analyses using census data consistently reveal a deficit of girls relative to boys in India's population, a deficit attributable to sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and the systematic provision of inferior nutrition and healthcare to girl children. The 2011 Indian census recorded a child sex ratio of 914 girls per 1,000 boys, declining from 927 in 2001—a trajectory that, if continued, would produce the kind of extreme demographic imbalance that Padmanabhan projects in her fiction.

The causes of this crisis are multiple and contested. They include the intersection of son preference—rooted in the patrilineal inheritance systems, the dowry economy, and the expectation that sons will support parents in old age—with the availability of modern sex-determination technology such as ultrasound. They also include deeper structural dynamics of economic inequality, the devaluation of female labour, and the cultural frameworks that position daughters as financial liabilities and sons as investments. Padmanabhan's novel engages with these causes not through direct representation but through speculative extrapolation: by imagining a world in which they have been pursued to their logical extreme, she illuminates their logic in the present.

2.3 Critical Geography and the Spatial Politics of Gender

The novel's central spatial metaphor—the island of lost girls, a space of segregation and containment carved out of a mainland organised around gender-selective elimination—invites analysis through the frameworks of critical geography, which examines the mutual constitution of social power and spatial organisation. Doreen Massey's arguments about the gendering of space—her demonstration that spatial arrangements both reflect and reproduce gender hierarchies—are particularly relevant here. The island of Padmanabhan's title is not merely a setting but an analytical figure: it spatialises the condition of the missing women, giving form to their enforced separation from the social mainstream and their simultaneous preservation as a surplus population.

Henri Lefebvre's distinction between 'conceived space' (the abstract space of plans and ideologies), 'perceived space' (the everyday spatial practices of inhabitants), and 'lived space' (the symbolic meanings and resistances that develop within spatial orders) offers a further analytical resource for reading the novel's geography. The island functions simultaneously at all three of these levels: it is a conceived space, produced by the administrative logic of the dystopian state; a perceived space, experienced through the daily practices of its inhabitants; and a lived space, invested with meanings, memories, and resistances that exceed and contest the state's intentions.

3. THE ARCHITECTURE OF ABSENCE

3.1 Absence as Narrative Principle

The most formally distinctive feature of The Island of Lost Girls is the way in which it makes absence—the missing girls of its title—into an active narrative principle rather than merely a theme. Padmanabhan's narrative is structured around gaps, silences, and oblique approaches to the violence it represents, refusing the direct representation that might produce either sentimentalism or desensitisation. This narrative strategy is itself a form of ethical and political practice: it insists that the violence it addresses cannot be captured or exhausted by any single representation, that the absence it mourns exceeds any particular attempt to fill it.

This approach connects Padmanabhan's work to a broader tradition of feminist writing that has grappled with the problem of how to represent atrocity—particularly gendered atrocity—without reproducing the silencing or the spectacularisation that are its characteristic cultural accompaniments. Adrienne Rich's concept of 'revision'—the act of seeing again with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is relevant here. Padmanabhan's oblique narrative approach is a form of revision: it approaches the well-known facts of gender-selective violence from a new angle, defamiliarising them sufficiently to make them visible again rather than simply confirming what the reader already knows.

3.2 Fragmented Chronology and the Temporal Politics of Trauma

The novel's use of fragmented, non-linear chronology is central to its representation of gender violence as a condition that shapes temporal as well as spatial experience. Trauma theory, developed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, has established that traumatic experience disrupts the sequential temporality of narrative: it cannot be integrated into linear autobiography but persists as a repetition-compulsion, a return of what cannot be properly remembered or mourned. Padmanabhan's narrative structure formally enacts this temporal disruption, moving between past and present, between the mainland and the island, between individual memory and collective history, in ways that resist the consolations of sequential narrative.

This temporal fragmentation has a specific political significance in the context of India's gender crisis. The missing women are missing not only from the demographic record but from cultural memory: their absence is actively produced and maintained by a complex of practices—the suppression of female infanticide as a topic of public discourse, the normalisation of sex-selective abortion, the framing of son preference as cultural tradition rather than gender violence—that prevent their loss from being acknowledged or mourned. Padmanabhan's fractured narrative syntax contests this cultural amnesia: it refuses to allow the missing girls to be smoothly absent, insisting on the irregularity, the unresolved quality, of their disappearance.

3.3 Multiple Focalisers and the Democratisation of Witness

The novel's use of multiple narrative perspectives or focalisers is another element of its ethical strategy. Rather than privileging a single consciousness through which the dystopian world is mediated—the mode of most canonical dystopian fiction—Padmanabhan distributes narrative authority across several characters, none of whom has complete access to the whole picture. This multiplication of perspectives is itself a feminist gesture: it contests the singular, authoritative viewpoint that has historically been coded as masculine and that has often reproduced, even in ostensibly critical texts, the marginalisation of female experience.

The various focalisers in The Island of Lost Girls are positioned differently in relation to the novel's central power dynamics: some inhabit the mainland, others the island; some are perpetrators or beneficiaries of gender-selective violence, others are its targets. By moving between these perspectives, Padmanabhan creates a panoramic representation of a society structured by gender violence, one that illuminates the complicity, the self-deception, and the occasional resistance of different subject positions. This narrative strategy is politically important: it refuses the comfortable option of locating gender violence in a clearly demarcated category of 'bad people' and instead reveals it as a systemic condition that implicates a wide range of subjects.

4. THE ISLAND AS GEOGRAPHY OF POWER AND RESISTANCE

4.1 The Island as Spatial Metaphor

Islands have long served as privileged settings for utopian and dystopian thought. From Thomas More's Utopia (1516), which gives the tradition its name, to Shakespeare's The Tempest, Golding's Lord of the Flies, and contemporary climate-fiction, the island has provided a bounded, manageable space in which social arrangements can be established, tested, and critiqued in concentrated form. Padmanabhan's use of the island metaphor in The Island of Lost Girls engages with this literary-philosophical tradition while also giving it a specific South Asian inflection: the island of her title is not a natural geographical feature but a constructed, administered space, a deliberate social artefact produced by the mainland's management of its demographic surplus.

The name itself—'Island of Lost Girls'—is resonant with multiple meanings. The girls are 'lost' in the statistical sense—they are the missing women of India's demographic crisis—but they are also 'lost' in the psychological and existential senses: separated from families, from communities, from the futures that were denied them by their society's gender-selective logic. The 'island' suggests both isolation and containment, a space defined by its separation from the mainland, by the water that surrounds it and marks the limit of its inhabitants' freedom. But islands are also, in the utopian tradition, potential sites of alternative social organisation: spaces that, precisely because of their separation from the dominant order, might foster different ways of living together.

4.2 The Mainland as Panoptic Order

The novel's representation of the mainland—the society from which the lost girls have been separated—constitutes an anatomy of the social mechanisms that produce gender-selective violence. Padmanabhan is attentive to the ways in which these mechanisms operate not primarily through dramatic acts of violence but through the accumulation of small, normalised practices: the preference expressed for male children, the differential allocation of resources within families, the institutional indifference of medical and administrative systems, the cultural frameworks that make daughters a burden and sons an asset. This attention to the banality of gender violence—its rootedness in everyday practice rather than exceptional cruelty—is one of the novel's most important political contributions.

The mainland's social order is characterised by a particular form of power that combines Foucauldian biopower with what might be called a demographic rationality—a logic that assesses population in terms of utility, gender ratio, and reproductive efficiency. The missing girls are not the victims of individual hatred but of a systemic calculation that has determined their superfluousness. This systemic dimension of the violence is crucial to Padmanabhan's analysis: it insists that gender-selective elimination cannot be understood simply as the product of backward attitudes or ignorant individuals but reflects the logic of a broader social system that must itself be contested and transformed.

4.3 Borders, Boundaries, and the Limits of Control

The boundary between the island and the mainland functions as one of the novel's central symbolic sites. Borders are, in the tradition of critical geography, never merely geographical features: they are social and political constructions that simultaneously reflect and reproduce the power relations they demarcate. The border in The Island of Lost Girls is a line that separates the surplus from the mainstream, the dispensable from the valued, the female from the male. Its maintenance requires constant work—not only the physical work of surveillance and enforcement but the ideological work of convincing those on both sides of its necessity and naturalness.

Padmanabhan's treatment of this border is nuanced and politically significant. She is attentive to the ways in which borders are both enforced from without—by the administrative apparatus of the state—and internalised from within, by the subjects they demarcate. The girls on the island have, to varying degrees, internalised the values of a society that devalued them, and their responses to their situation are accordingly varied and contradictory. This complexity of response is one of the most realistic and politically sophisticated aspects of the novel: it refuses the easy option of portraying the oppressed as uncomplicated victims or heroes and instead insists on the subjective complexity produced by living within a system of power that one did not choose and cannot easily escape.

5. FEMALE SOLIDARITY, MEMORY, AND COUNTER-NARRATIVE

5.1 The Politics of Solidarity

One of the most significant dimensions of The Island of Lost Girls is its exploration of female solidarity as both a psychic resource and a political practice. The island functions not only as a space of confinement but as a space of community—a place where women who have been separated from the mainstream social order develop bonds of mutual support, shared understanding, and collective resistance. This representation of female solidarity participates in a long tradition of feminist literary and political thought that has insisted on the importance of women's collectives as sites of consciousness-raising, mutual aid, and political organisation.

Padmanabhan is careful to avoid romanticising this solidarity or presenting it as naturally given. The women on the island are not automatically united: they are divided by differences of class, caste, regional origin, and personal history; they harbour jealousies, misunderstandings, and competing loyalties. The solidarity that develops among them is not a product of essential female nature but of their shared experience of dispossession and their developing recognition of its common sources. This insistence on the constructed, achieved quality of solidarity—rather than its naturalness or inevitability—is both politically realistic and theoretically sophisticated, consonant with the arguments of feminist theorists such as bell hooks, who have insisted that coalition politics requires active work to build across lines of difference.

5.2 Memory, Mourning, and the Feminist Archive

Memory occupies a central place in the novel's narrative and thematic architecture. For the women on the island, the ability to remember—to retain and transmit knowledge of their histories, their families, their lost futures—is not merely a psychological consolation but a political act. In a society that has produced them as surplus and invisible, memory is a form of insistence: a refusal to accept the erasure that the social order has decreed. Padmanabhan's novel is deeply attentive to the ways in which gender violence works through cultural memory as well as through physical force: by suppressing the documentation of female lives, by preventing the transmission of women's histories across generations, by naturalising the absence of women from public record, the dominant order maintains its control not only over bodies but over the imaginative possibilities of its subjects.

The island functions, among its other roles, as a kind of feminist archive—a space in which the suppressed memories and histories of the missing girls are preserved and transmitted. This archival function is fragile and contested: it is always under threat from both external forces (the mainland's interest in maintaining the erasure it has produced) and internal ones (the internalised valuations that lead some of the island's inhabitants to accept the terms of their own marginalisation). But its fragility does not negate its significance: the archive is important precisely because it is endangered, because the histories it preserves would otherwise be lost.

5.3 Counter-Narrative and the Politics of Representation

At the most fundamental level, The Island of Lost Girls is itself a counter-narrative: a fictional intervention that makes visible what the dominant culture has an interest in keeping invisible. Padmanabhan's choice to address India's missing women through the medium of speculative dystopian fiction rather than through realist representation or documentary narrative is itself a political choice, one that reflects a considered judgement about the capacities and limitations of different representational modes.

Realist fiction, with its commitment to the accurate depiction of the existing world, faces particular challenges in representing a violence that is precisely characterised by its normalisation and invisibility: the sex-selective elimination of girls is not a dramatic event but a pervasive condition, distributed across millions of individual decisions and institutional indifferences. Documentary narrative, with its reliance on the testimony of identifiable subjects, faces the challenge that the primary subjects of gender-selective violence are those who have been prevented from existing and who therefore cannot speak. Speculative fiction, by contrast, can represent the systemic logic of gender violence in concentrated, visible form, and can give voice to the missing girls by imagining, in the space of fiction, the lives they were denied.

6. INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS: ESCAPE, THE HANDMAID'S TALE, AND THE FEMINIST DYSTOPIAN TRADITION

Reading The Island of Lost Girls alongside Escape illuminates the development of Padmanabhan's feminist vision across the two novels. Where Escape imagines the terminal endpoint of gender-selective violence—a world entirely without women—The Island of Lost Girls explores an intermediate moment: a world in which girls are missing but not entirely gone, in which the logic of elimination has produced a demographic crisis but has not yet resolved it into the abyss of Escape's all-male dystopia. Together, the two novels constitute a kind of feminist diptych, exploring complementary aspects of the same underlying social pathology and offering different but related analyses of the possibilities of resistance.

The relationship between the two novels also invites comparison with the dystopian pairing of The Handmaid's Tale and its successor The Testaments (2019), in which Atwood returned to Gilead thirty-five years later to trace the processes of its unravelling. Like Atwood, Padmanabhan is interested in the long temporality of dystopian social formations, in the processes by which they are established, maintained, and potentially contested. And like Atwood, she uses the multi-text form to suggest that dystopia is not a fixed or final state but a dynamic formation, always subject to the pressures of resistance and transformation.

The Island of Lost Girls also engages with the South Asian feminist literary tradition represented by writers such as Ismat Chughtai, Mahasweta Devi, and Bapsi Sidhwa, who have used fiction to interrogate the intersections of gender, caste, class, and colonial/postcolonial power in the South Asian context. Padmanabhan's speculative mode distinguishes her approach from the social realism of these predecessors, but her thematic concerns—the bodily vulnerability of women, the violence of normative gender expectations, the possibilities of female agency within constraining structures—place her firmly within their tradition.

7. CONCLUSION

The Island of Lost Girls is a significant achievement in the feminist dystopian tradition and a major contribution to the literature of India's gender crisis. Through its construction of absence as a narrative principle, its sophisticated geography of power and resistance, its exploration of female solidarity and memory as political resources, and its deployment of the island metaphor as a complex spatial figure, the novel develops a mode of feminist witness that is both formally inventive and politically engaged. Padmanabhan's refusal to domesticate or sentimentalise the violence she addresses, her insistence on its systemic and pervasive character, and her commitment to representing the full complexity of her characters' responses to their situation—all of these make the novel an important contribution to the ongoing project of feminist literary culture. This article has argued that The Island of Lost Girls makes its most important contribution not through any single narrative argument or thematic claim but through the form of attention it cultivates in its readers: an attention that is alert to the structural dimensions of gender violence, sensitive to the psychological complexity of those who inhabit its conditions, and committed to the possibility of resistance even in circumstances of extreme constraint. This form of attention—what we might call a feminist narrative ethics of witness—is, Padmanabhan suggests, both a literary achievement and a political practice: a way of reading

the world that might contribute to changing it. Further research should examine the novel's reception history, particularly its reception in India, where the issues it addresses are most immediately present. The relationship between the novel's speculative dimension and its documentary sources—the demographic and sociological literature on India's missing women—also warrants more sustained attention. And the novel's place within the global feminist dystopian tradition merits comparative analysis that situates it alongside contemporary works from Africa, Latin America, and East Asia, where analogous issues of gender-selective violence are being addressed through analogous literary strategies.

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