



Research article

AI, Power and Female Body: Exploring Female Agency in Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls*

Tanu Aastha^{1*} & Arpana Jha²

¹Research Scholar, ²Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya. *Corresponding author.

Abstract

The futuristic setting of the dystopian novel *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) explores the techno-patriarchal society and how they shape female agency when these characters lack access to truth and knowledge. Manjula Padmanabhan's Meiji is a teenager, the only girl in a country where there has been a systematic eradication of the female gender. The novel presents her journey from this "Wasteland" to "Vane Island", a place away from her family, where knowledge is restricted and monitored, which further raises the question of autonomy and fragmented identity. This research paper uses Donna Haraway's "situated knowledge" to explore the complexities of power dynamics that underlie knowledge production and female subjectivity. Haraway's idea of "cyborg" has been used to discuss the blurred boundaries of identity, which facilitates fluidity, liberation and empowerment of the female. Judy Wjcmán's "AI feminism" takes this idea forward and reveals the scope of transformation in the role of AI from a tool of control to that of liberation and survival. By using these theoretical frameworks, the paper aims to examine the dual role of AI as a mechanism of oppression as well as a site of resistance. This opens ways for facilitating agency and empowerment among female characters.

Keywords: Female Agency, AI Feminism, Cyborgization, Situated Knowledge, Power Dynamics

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1. Introduction

Manjula Padmanabhan is a Delhi-born Indian author and illustrator who explores the intersection of technology, science, gender and social power structures in her works. Not merely staging dystopian spectacle, the literary works of Padmanabhan provide poignant narratives shedding light on how the characters practice agency and resilience in the face of systematic oppression. Her works centre around finding how the female protagonists find their agency in a technologically advanced world, wherein her novels also challenge the readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, control, and the future of humanity. Manjula shares a willingness to bring out the controversial topics and tackle the complexities of society through her works. *Escape* (2008) and its sequel, *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), explore contemporary societal conditions in a technologically advanced world in which patriarchy prevails and the female population suffers in return.

This study focuses on *The Island of Lost Girls*, which stages an illusory, purported sanctuary that promises to preserve women but may be installing new modalities of control masked beneath the rescue game. The author uses Meiji, who is a girl from a world where no women exist as they have been erased systematically, who embarks on a journey to a land that claims to protect and preserve women, as a lens to explore contested agency. The systematic monitoring does not just limit actions but in the name of freedom and The novel follows Meiji from a world where no women exist as they have been systematically erased, to a land that claims to protect and preserve women; however, the underlying truth is that it functions in a similar way, where, in the name of freedom and identity, it further suppresses and oppresses the characters. The novel explores female agency in the face of adversity.

The setting of the book, *The Island of Lost Girls*, is on an island that represents a technologically advanced society. It claims to be female-centric but functions in the same way as any techno-patriarchal society, where various technologies are central to maintaining control. The ruling people use technologies to regulate the female inhabitants of the island, which creates a stark power dynamic between them. Surveillance systems and data collection are used to maintain control so that the Island's inhabitants remain under their control. On the other hand, in the novel, the female body becomes a battleground in the struggle for agency. The female characters navigate their bodies as it is both controlled by the ruling elite and also a source of power. They use technology to resist expectations imposed on them by society and assert their autonomy, which highlights the importance of reclaiming bodily autonomy and the possible shift of technology from a tool of control to a tool of empowerment.

2. Contextualising the Socio-Political Setting of *The Island of Lost Girls*

The Island of Lost Girls mirrors contemporary times by exaggerating the existing inequalities of the present to reveal their logical extremes, and not merely represent bleak futures. This work is structured around totalitarian power, which often relies on surveillance infrastructure to monitor the behaviour of its people and shape what can be known or said. In the novel, this constant monitoring of the subjects is represented when Youngest/ Yasmine reaches the destination and he is confronted with several surveillance technologies all around him like "tiny robotic cameras buzzed and hummed, weaving above the crowd exactly like flies. He swatted them away or crushed them between his fingers, without noticing that they were machines, not insects" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 04).

These dystopian works often present the ways in which marginalised voices are monitored, then either erased or rewritten. From George Orwell's *1984*, where the fear of Thought Police and Big Brother forces people to suppress themselves, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* in which the citizens are engineered to want what the government dictates, to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, where cameras broadcast entire lives of characters, leaving them with no privacy in the name of transparency, each follows the theme of subjugation by the ruling system that seeks to oppress the common mass in to have control over them. Often, the technology and the power structure exploit the female body either in the context of reproductive labour as portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood or by trying to silence their voice as shown in *Vox* by Christina Dalcher, among others. In the book *The Island of Lost Girls*, Youngest/ Yasmine informs Aila (a transie from the suspended city) about the Generals who think of themselves as "sculptors, carving reality to suit their ideas" (Padmanabhan, 2015, pp. 83). These dictators (the Generals) believe that women are inferior versions of men who pulled them behind with their emotional and fragile existence and were required to be exterminated and hence, "the first thing they did when they came to power was to force all the men to destroy all the women...who resisted were hunted down, dragged into the streets and butchered... Unborn babies were torn out of their wombs" (Padmanabhan, 2015, pp. 83-84). It all happens when these Generals can clone humans and no longer need women's reproductive organs. The women of the country are reduced to mere reproduction and hence are eradicated once out of use. But these dystopias do contain seeds of resistance despite the horrible conditions. These may be subtle acts of solidarity, storytelling, relationality and memory.

Manjula Padmanabhan's dystopia revolves around and reflects the contemporary issues of patriarchal control and technological advancement. The complete erasure of the females referred to as "vermins," "filth," "scum" is enabled because of perfection in the cloning technologies developed and widely used by Generals who are "cloned brothers." This backdrop, along with being science fiction, is also an allegory that criticises the political structure of the world where gender-based genocide is prevalent. The Forbidden Country, where these Generals come from, is a hyper-masculinist regime, where reproductive technology like eugenics and cloning has been used to eradicate women, reflecting on the chilling intersection of biopolitics and misogyny. He compares men and women, saying:

There is no question that a Vermin's genitals evolved to be the counterpart of a man's. However, in order to have access to those verminous body parts, men were forced to embrace despicable, slimy beings with weak minds and intolerable emotions. For me and all those others who form my unique tribe in the country we call Brotherland, that compromise was abominable. We had no option but to enjoy other men as our intimate companions... you know nothing of what it means to be a Man. A lord-like being whose need to flatten the imperfection of the world, to bend reality to his vision, is like a burning, untameable passion (Padmanabhan, 2015, pp. 99-100).

Surveillance, extraction, and the mechanised use of "feminised" labour are not accidental, but they are engineered. The General forced Youngest to undergo vaginoplasty to become a "transie" in the terminology of this world, specifically to shame, humiliate, and break him, because, following their logic, "being a woman" is the worst thing a man can be reduced to (Mehta et al., 2016). "You cannot know what delight it brings me to be able to bend another being such as myself- my equal in physique, in performance, in intellect- to bend such a being to perform as a Vermin, *within the body of a Vermin*" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 100). The

General understands Youngest's supposed "femaleness" as an open invitation to rape him repeatedly (Mehta et al., 2016).

The novel becomes a speculative extrapolation of exactly what happens when those in power build technology without inclusive ethics or diversity of input. The world outside this horrific place is divided into enclaves, each divided and isolated by political and technological gates. At the centre is Zone, an arena of endless games of violence fought by teams representing different enclaves who are rewarded with money, power and prestige (Babu, 2017). The condition of women here is miserable. As one of the mentors explains, "Once it was clear that there would only ever be all-men's teams, the whole shameful exploitation of women who live in the Zone- as booty, as trophies, as entertainment, whatever- became the established norm" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 312).

This resembles the contemporary issues of border surveillance and global inequality, and primarily, the suffering of women in the whole setup. In the novel, it has been twenty-two years since eco-anarchists detonated underground nuclear devices at the mouth of the Suez Canal with the aim of quickly collapsing the petroleum industry. But this plan backfired as the "explosions punctured the Earth's mantle, spewing molten magma in a furious, untameable geyser that, when it subsided, became the glowering crack now known as the Peace Gorge" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 11). In the next few years, all the unions and parties melted away, "to be reborn as the Whole World union, the WWU," (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 11) and under its rule "the planet was split into four exclusive enclaves. No trade, no travel arrangements, no direct communications, and no relocation were possible between the enclaves (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 11).

3. AI as a Tool of Control and Discrimination from the Lens of Haraway's *Situated Knowledge*

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a powerful tool that can build or destroy the world by shaping societal power structures. It influences our way of interaction and sways our understanding of the world (Atanasoski, 2023). The data that it feeds on creates differences in its behaviour. It limits the information and influences public opinion, which creates discrimination faced by the marginalised. It directly influences the decision-making process, impacting the autonomy and representation that creates societal bias. In the name of security and awareness, the patriarchal power system tries to suppress and control women. The female body, in particular, has been a site of oppression, control and resistance in this regard (Butler, 1990), be it dress code, gender hierarchy, reproductive restrictions or any other, they have been subjugated across all cultures. Discrimination and marginalisation based on gender are not only rampant in Indian society, but it is prevalent in the Western world as well (Bhowmick and Magang, 2024). To fight this suppression, a feminist approach to AI has surfaced in current times, which aims to empower women by exposing the system and providing help and facilities in the field.

Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" (1988) claims that knowledge is always generated from a socio-cultural and political context rather than from a neutral, disembodied perspective. It is never as objective as it claims to be; rather, it is subjective to the context it belongs to. The codes used to run an AI is hugely influenced by datasets from the internet, historical records, and institutional archives, which brings with itself the bias that does not adequately represent the diversity of human experiences (Drage & Frabetti, 2021). This leads to models performing favourably for certain groups of people and opposite for the others.

Gender bias is one common biasness which manifest in less accurate or even harmful AI predictions (Colombo, 2024). Specific AI-based recruiting systems have been shown to favour men over women candidates, where men are presented in leadership positions, whereas women are in domestic, sexualised, and passive roles (Colombo, 2024). These AIs reflect their creators' needs, often neglecting or misinterpreting women's needs in particular (Khan, 2024). It often struggles with emotional narratives, unable to register the survivor testimonials or document the gender-based violence. But all of this often goes unnoticed.

Haraway (1988) calls it "*a god trick*" (p. 582) because it makes the viewer believe that they can see everything from an imaginary and impossible standpoint. But it is also a trick because what appears to be everything, and what appears to be neutral, is always what she terms a "*partial perspective*" (p. 583). Information and knowledge can bring the truth about the narratives into light, but the novel critiques how knowledge is shaped by power when the General in the novel talks about eradicating females just because they were emotional beings with fragile physiques who challenged the system they lived under. Hence, Haraway's focus on the accountability of knowledge to its origin makes sense. To accept that AI is a tool of specific historical, cultural, and political contexts, and hence, there is a need for more accountability, as the lack of transparency makes these AI tools for control.

In the novel, the Generals use cloning and technological control to erase female subjectivity, operating from a position of disembodied authority. Their knowledge systems are presented as rational, yet they are deeply situated in patriarchal violence. General justifies the deeds to Aila about the eradication because, according to them, from the moment the female gender started to question things and began challenging their lowly positions, both genders entered the arena of conflict. He says, "We, men, lost our bearings. We allowed ourselves to be beguiled...Once they wriggled free of our constraints, they could not be beaten back to servitude. Which left us with only one alternative: removing them altogether" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 114). The Island, in contrast to the Wasteland, is a space where knowledge is partial, embodied, and contested. Meiji's struggle is not to understand some universal truth but to understand her own body, which was chemically suppressed and socially erased. It is immediately recognisable in relation to the discourse that European-American feminism has fostered in the past three decades, about the narrative of taking pride in one's body (Butler, 1990; Beauvoir, 1949), and particularly the idea that one must be "comfortable" in one's body in ways the West understands as emancipatory (Mehta et al., 2016). Butler's argument on maternity as a social construction of a female (1993) is portrayed on the Island when Meiji is asked to disrobe to let go of patriarchal shame, to see a live birth, and she literally cannot stand it. Meiji's journey is about redefining womanhood (Butler, 1993) beyond reproductive utility and binary norms.

This identification of self also reflects Haraway's thought that knowledge must be accountable to the bodies from which it emerges. AI developed by the powerful elite is made in a way to determine which information the common public will be consuming and further influence their opinion by filtering and gatekeeping the information, and hence manipulating it. The brains behind these technologies are more accountable than the technology they are employing to serve their purpose. In the novel, the girls who are brought to the Island have their memories erased by the Mentors without taking the consent of these girls through a process called "Memrase" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 141) so that they cannot remember their past, which was very agonising, the pain their mind and body went through, and hence, as a result, they can heal. And those who had to leave shall go through the same process so as not to leak the

whereabouts of the Island. George Orwell's *1984* resembles this, where The Party constantly erases history and rewrites it. Yoko Ogawa's *The Memory Police* forces the inhabitants of the island to forget those whom they want to systematically erase from existence. This creates a lack of identity and autonomy among the characters. In the novel, Emmi, one among several Mentors of the Island, says, "If I want to leave, they'll erase my memories. I don't think they offer choices" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 134). This leads to monopolising the narratives where the voice of the marginalised is silenced. Meiji feels her identity is fragmented long before knowing the truth about memory loss; she feels that there was "a wall within her brain that made it impossible for her to know the simplest of things...The lack of a name had been worse than anything else. When it came back, the lack of other memories became even more mysterious (Padmanabhan, 2015, pp. 119-120). This erasure of memory is a way of filtering the information, gatekeeping the truth and only exposing what the suppressors find useful.

The Island of Lost Girls, portrays the powerful elite group who employs AI-powered surveillance to keep an eye on the common masses and manage their behaviour so that they can ensure that the female inhabitants remain subjugated. This surveillance is not done openly but is framed as a protective measure, but it ultimately reinforces systemic oppression to ensure that no resistance is possible against them. In the novel, Aila informs Youngest about the place and the government, saying "They are always looking, listening. Waiting to hear if someone is telling the truth or not" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 55). Meiji, Youngest and several other subjugated characters' struggle in this setting which highlights the tension between technological oversight against them and their human agency. This raises the question of whether AI can ever be neutral in matters of power and gender. The girls on the Island are stripped of their original names, memories and histories and their subjectivity is almost invisible. It is exactly how it happens with the marginalised. The power regime decides who gets to be counted, remembered or even known. The bare minimum of the identity and existence of these girls depends on the government. The girls' memories which are in pieces, their hallucinated truths, and whispered stories become forms of epistemological resistance. This face-to-face encountering of a state-sanctioned "truth" aligns with Spivak's notion of the subaltern who are not being allowed to speak (1988).

The General's actual plan is to infiltrate the Island, and to do so, he bargains with Youngest. He forces him to undergo sex reassignment surgery to become a woman and to sell Meiji to the Island (Babu, 2017). The General and the brothers seeking to dominate the whole world use the Youngest as a spy. They attach various surveillance devices to his body to track him and keep an eye on his actions. These devices, like a radio link, satellite locators with poison sacs inside them and pain radio ensured that all of Youngest's actions and words are conveyed to the General (Babu, 2017). He explains to Youngest that "because of what they will release into you-you and your vermin brat-should you happen to disobey. You'd not forgotten, had you, that I can cause catastrophic death of neurotoxin anytime I want (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 89). A similar satellite locator is installed on Meiji's body, which acts as an inspiration for Youngest to follow the General. These devices ensure complete submission and obedience to the General (Babu, 2017). In the novel,

Youngest had a recorded voice whispering in his ears. He had three electronic leashes tying him to the voice that forced him to remain on the path he had created. The twin satellite locator, one on the wrist, one over his heart and the pain radio in his teeth (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 15).

Even on the Island, Meiji is faced with various controlling technologies. Her memory has been erased to keep her safe from the memories of her life before coming to the Island. Also, the mentors can read the minds of the girls. The advanced technology made this impossible act a common thing in that place. Mentor Vane explains that “We can translate the language of thought. I have a screen on which I get a read-out of your wave patterns accompanied by an interpretation, in ordinary words, of what those patterns mean” (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 270).

4. Haraway's *Cyborgization* as a Posthuman Agency in Speculative Fiction

Since the beginning of time, the female body has been a site of control and resistance in patriarchal societies. Be it any time, any country, any culture, the female body has always been suppressed as well as oppressed. They have been restricted in the way they dress because of the expectation of modesty; they lack reproductive rights; they are forced into certain roles framed by society, and have always been victims of gender bias (Sabala and Gopal, 2010). However, this female body has also shown resistance from time to time, making it a tool of defiance. They protest to reclaim their autonomy through art, reclaiming narratives in literature, challenging beauty standards or other personal choices. *A Cyborg Manifesto* (Haraway, 1985) reimagines the relationship between technology and the body, offering a feminist perspective on AI's role in reshaping human identity and also blurring the boundaries between human and machines, male and female, nature and culture. The cyborg becomes a metaphor for posthuman agency. *Posthumanism* (2013) by Rosi Braidotti claims to move away from anthropocentrism by destabilising humans as a centre of power and ethics and by broadening the spectrum to animals, cyborgs, and AI so as to dismantle the binaries and reimagine power, not as domination but as entanglement, care, and co-creation.

The Island in the novel is a contested and imperfect refuge instead of a utopia that it claims to be. Nevertheless, it represents a space where situated knowledges can emerge. “Instead of reasserting the holistic perception of the mythical womanhood, smeared in essentialist characterisation through femininity and the pragmatics of reproduction, the works showcase a constantly shifting identity” (Basu & Tripathi, 2023). The women and trans individuals who inhabit it are not passive victims; instead, they are engaged in acts of reclamation, healing, and resistance. Mentor Maia describes how the female bodies are the source of immense power as it can give birth and within these bodies “the mystery of life remains coiled and dormant. In ages past, women were powerless and wretched. Their mystic energy was trapped by the powers of men, who sought to control them and therefore to control the force of life itself” (Padmanabhan, 2015, pp. 298-299).

Youngest's transformation into a transgender female to protect Meiji from the General complicates the binaries of gender and power. His performance of femininity is a survival strategy as well as a critique of the rigid gender codes enforced by the Generals. Haraway would see this as a form of *situated embodiment* which means the refusal to accept fixed categories and a recognition of the fluid and constructed nature of identity. Meiji's awakening of identity is not a linear journey toward truth but a process of learning to see differently and often uniquely. It is the process of questioning what she has been taught, to listen to silenced voices, to ask what gender is, and to reclaim her own narrative which is the heart of Haraway's feminist epistemology of *seeing with*, not *seeing from above*.

Padmanabhan's world is pregnant with posthuman elements such as clones, drones, and cybernetic bodies, but it is not celebrating technological transcendence. Instead, it critiques

how these technologies are used to entrench hierarchies and erase differences. The novel raises questions as to what happens when AI and biotechnology are produced and handled by those who see women as “vermin?” Haraway’s cyborg is a figure of resistance that is a hybrid that refuses to be pure and hence, embraces contradiction. Meiji is in her fragmented identity, and thus, becomes a kind of cyborg who must navigate the ruins of both patriarchy and technology to forge a new way of being. Her pursuit of understanding womanhood challenges the ignorance imposed on her which exposes her further to greater surveillance and control. The lost girls on the island challenge patriarchal and systematic control and their defiance is not always direct, but it mostly manifests in subtle acts of survival and sharing of knowledge.

The novel highlights memory as a tool of defiance by showing how the reclamation of narratives challenges the official history dictated by the elite. This aligns with real-world feminist movements that use storytelling to preserve identity and resistance. Meiji feels the loss of self when she comes to know about her memory loss. She utters in shock and concern, “They took our memories without asking! Now I have nothing but my name. I don’t know who I am, ...where I come from!” ... “What is ‘safe’? When strangers can reach inside my brain and take away whatever they want?” (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 189). But while discussing her experience on the island with Mentor Folia, she had a glimpse of her past, which instantly boosted her confidence in herself. Mentor Folia watched her and “saw the girl’s energy shift from defeat to strength in the space of an eye-blink. A hand had reached out from her past and supported her in the moment of her need. She had staggered but did not fall” (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 309).

Education, knowledge, and information can serve as vital tools for empowerment, giving individuals agency, transforming society, and bringing economic mobility. Access to information helps one decide for oneself, challenge the oppressive power structure, and raise one’s voice for the underprivileged. Women have the opportunity to think critically and navigate the complex social and economic landscape. While training, Meiji answered a question thrown at her and “the way the words had spurted from her mouth had taken her by surprise. They were a reminder of what lay hidden within her, the storehouse of knowledge as well as memories of her past” (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 202). This experience made her curious and desperate, both, to regain her lost memory. When she finally gets some of her memory back, “her heart had lifted with the knowledge of a loving attention so intense it was painful. If she opened her mouth, it would spill out and flood this room, this Island. Everyone here would drown in that scalding tide” (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 352).

5. *Techno Feminism as a Tool of Empowerment*

AI, traditionally, has always been embedded within technocratic and capitalist logic, aligning with Foucault’s “biopower,” wherein technologies regulate populations, leading to discriminatory outcomes. But it also exists in paradox, as it can be used both as a tool of oppression or liberation. As often as it is considered a tool for control, it can also be subverted to challenge and dismantle oppressive systems. This shift can happen when there are initiatives taken to diversify AI designs, make it transparent and accountable, and program it for care and solidarity. In the novel, when Mentor Vane comes to know of Youngest’s condition of being tracked constantly, she uses “a plug of what looked like putty in her hands. She proceeded to place it in his mouth, moulding it onto his back teeth...The material was dense and heavy, but

malleable enough that he could bite down on it" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 319). She informed him, "For the moment, your receiver-transmitter's frequency has been cancelled" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 319). "'No signal,' he said, barely able to believe his own words. He was free from the General" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 319). This shift is not linear, but it brings opportunity for imagining AI as a tool for empowerment. "By centering AI development on human needs, AI models may enhance transparency and support human understanding and decision making, preventing AI from overshadowing human autonomy and ensuring balanced interactions" (Brandtzaeg et al., 2024).

According to Judy Wajcman, AI is conditioned and performative and hence, can be reshaped. Her particular focus is on gendered AI, which is not itself a problem, but the patriarchal culture and practices within which these are developed are. Unlike earlier critiques, which portray AI as a mechanism of control and discrimination, Wajcman offers a complementary, future-facing perspective. This gives way for feminist intervention to not just critique but co-create. Mentor Vane gives a brief about the Island and its functioning to Youngest, where the living sea organisms are hybridised, their physical dimensions are altered and a strain is created that lives symbiotically with the people of the island who maintain their food supply, and they can function indefinitely. The nervous system of these organisms provides them with whatever power is needed. This power is then transmitted through nerves. She acknowledges that the marine world has produced versions of everything that humans use in electronics... "we have merely synthesised and repurposed what was already there" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 323).

This shows the brilliant use of technology in harvesting the needful from the organic beings. In *Technofeminism* (2004), Wajcman argues, "The gendering of technology is not simply about who uses it, but about who designs it, who controls it, and whose values are embedded in it." According to her, technology is not a fixed outcome but a site of hope for change. "Techno Feminism" discusses how technology is intertwined with gendered power structures, bringing out technology's contribution in both supporting and resisting the patriarchal norms. It is not neutral; rather, it is socially constructed. Hence, techno feminism aims to build alternative systems, embracing hybrid identities. She calls for feminist reappropriation where there is a need to take deliberate steps to shape AI that reflects diversity and challenges the power structures. According to her, "Technologies are always open to redefinition and reappropriation" (Wajcman, 2004).

In Padmanabhan's dystopian novel *The Island of Lost Girls*, the Generals' regime is an example of what Wajcman critiques as a masculinist techno culture, a system where technological power is monopolised by patriarchal elites who use cloning, surveillance, and algorithmic governance to erase women from society. It mirrors Wajcman's concern that AI and digital systems often increase the existing gender gaps rather than reduce them. The Island becomes a counter-site, a space where technology is not rejected but reclaimed. The inhabitants of the Island are not merely resisting the Generals' technologies, but they are also building alternatives. Aila, on the death of her cruel patriarchal father, takes a pale blue drop in her mouth called "Eraser. One drop *and phwit!* Everything goes. Sadness, fear, pain, everything. Big help with problems" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 45). The Island where the novel is set is a refuge for women and trans individuals, where they are provided with a space for healing, resistance and reconstruction. Most of the girls who come to the island are torn and broken like "rag dolls," and they have to "spend days and sometimes weeks in the regenerative solution, just to get their bodies working again. The surgical scars, the piercings and tattoos

from their previous lives remain on their bodies as evidence of that life" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 337).

It is an imperfect zone where trauma and the past are being processed. The scientific advancement in the Island is not to control but to rebuild and reclaim what the patriarchal world broke. The women on the island refuse to replicate the Generals' logic of control, even when they have the tools to do so, which is in itself a radical act. It embodies Wajcman's belief that technologies can be reimagined to serve justice, not domination, if they are designed with feminist values at their core. At the Island, "we erase their memories. If they had a choice, they would ask us to do it... erasing their memories is a kindness" (Padmanabhan, 2015, p. 337). The inhabitants of the Island are techno feminist practitioners who embed care into the very fabric of their technological interventions. Feminist engagements with technology should be focused on care, relationality, and collective labour which are the values that are often excluded from mainstream tech cultures (Wajcman & Young, 2023). On the Island, care work is central and not invisible. The women and trans individuals who rebuild the wounded women's body and identity are not passive healers; instead, they are technological agents who perform complex surgeries and often intervene psychologically to erase traumatic memories and attempt mind reading to be able to socially reintegrate the victims. In Wajcman's terms, Meiji's eventual agency is not a return to a natural state determined by the time pre- technological state, but a reconstruction of self through situated, collective, and ethical tech practices.

This reflects Wajcman's vision of feminist AI as a transformative praxis, where marginalised communities become makers, not just subjects, of technology. This subversion of technology is discussed by Feminist theorists like Donna Haraway, who sees cyborgs as hybrid identities to escape gender binaries, and Rosi Braidotti, who decentralises the human and brings forth the concept of posthuman, arguing that agency can emerge by reconfiguring our relationship with technology, not rejecting it. The act of "stitching girls back together" is both literal and symbolic: it represents a feminist reengineering of bodies and identities that were mutilated by patriarchal control. This aligns with Wajcman's call to reshape technology from the margins, not abandon it. The novel's plot is not linear; it does not provide calm, comfort or closure. It unsettles the reader like these feminist AIs would do to the established power narratives. Meiji's fragmented identity and loss of memory are a fight to reclaim the erased history.

The Island functions to provide closure and healing to the survivors, which reflects the purpose of giving justice to the marginalised. The administration on the Island is a collective governance that provides care, reflecting a transparent, participatory system. The technology is used to rehabilitate and not extract, being embodied, plural and non-binary like the feminist AI. *The Island of Lost Girls* models the principles of feminist AI, where trauma is met with care, where technology is reclaimed, and where agency is not provided but forged through resistance.

6. Conclusion

Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls* sheds light on women's agency in the patriarchal world. The female characters of the novel navigate their way in the dystopian setting created and governed by patriarchy, where these characters find their agency in a world where existence has been deliberately erased. Meiji and the other lost girls of the Island try to look for their identity when their memories have been erased, and they have fragmented ideas about who they are. The consistent surveillance by the Generals and the Mentors in the novel

mirrors the real-world issues of constant monitoring in the digital world, where data is stolen, there is fragmented identity representation, and privacy is violated at every step. This majorly affects the marginalised and women. According to Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge," these AI functions the way they do because of the algorithm they are fed, which is deeply influenced by the existing power structure. The knowledge, according to Haraway, is not neutral but influenced by these elite, powerful patriarchal societies. Judy Wajcman finds an opportunity in this and claims that if AI can be programmed, feeding it the data that supports, understands and features the marginalised, women and others can change this whole system of oppression. Both theorists propose that there is a need for accountability when it comes to designing these AIs. The novel focuses on the issues where women try to reclaim voices that are forcefully erased or manipulated. It explores the use of AI in the context, where it can act as a tool for suppression as well as liberation. For it to act as a tool of liberation and empowerment, AI itself can be asked to show the way to remove discrimination against women. In the novel, the Island becomes a counter-site, a space where technology is not rejected but reclaimed. The inhabitants of the Island are not merely resisting the Generals' technologies, but they are also building alternatives. AI can be used to ask users to imagine a world where the corporate, political and tech sectors are led by more women, where AI-generated arts portray a world in which women have more opportunities and power and so on, to produce results with more diversity and less discrimination. In the novel, the technology on the Island is used to rehabilitate and not extract, being embodied, plural and non-binary like the feminist AI. Furthermore, education, diversity and inclusion will help in producing Artificial Intelligence that is unbiased, which does not control or discriminate but liberates and empowers its users.

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