

Feminist Images of the Future in the Selected Writings of Women Sci-fi Authors

Dr. Reshmi S

Assistant Professor of English, MES Asmabi College, Kodungallur, Thrissur, Kerala, India.

Abstract: The literary genre of Science Fiction was a male oriented realm for a long while but the era of 1960's witnessed the emergence of a subgenre called Feminist Science Fiction. The writings of Sci-fi women explored, experimented and presented feminist images of the future which in turn provided a varied glance of science and technology and even interrogated the male bastion of the conventions of Science Fiction. The paper analyses the speculative realities articulated by the prominent Sci-fi women writers like Octavia Butler, Ursula Le Guin, Alice Sheldon, Joanna Russ among others. The study deftly sketches the techniques and strategies of these writers to assert women's role as a perceiver and dynamic agents of change through the creation of a Utopian world, exploration of 'alienness', use of Female Revenge Fantasy, employment of Novum- outer space, cyborg, Transmogrification etc. It is reflected that the selected writers attempt to erase the gender differences, inequalities and imbalances that exist in reality. Feminist Science Fiction thus ponders the possibilities to speculate worlds and futures in which women are not restricted by the rules and roles rather guide them to navigate through the pathways of liberation. The world of Science Fiction opens up myriad and multi- dimensional arenas of female self -assertion.

Keywords: Women Science Fiction, Utopia, Alien, Outer Space and Female Identity.

Science Fiction expands its horizon in the broad spectrum of literary endeavour as a novum phenomenon or a speculative genre. The world -wide acceptance of science Fiction popularized it as a medium to characterize, destabilize and challenge the known models of reality, history and identity. This genre makes use of the innovative elements which has ties with technology, communication and multiple modes of digital replication. Brian Baker commented Science Fiction has experienced "crisis of legitimation" due to its low aesthetic experience but in 1998, Thomas Disch, the novelist declared "Science Fiction has come to permeate our culture in ways both – trivial and /or profound, obvious and / or insidious".

The evolution of Science Fiction distorts the boundaries between recognized literatures and mass literatures. Science Fiction is a critical and social discourse incorporating diverse perspectives connecting to aspects like gender, race, class, sexuality and technology that constitutes our society. Gary Westfahl in *Science Fiction* “challenges old beliefs and construct new paradigms. Hence the opposing origins and theorisation of Science Fiction itself becomes an enigma”. The definitions of Science Fiction clearly posit its association with society, history, identity and human life. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines Science Fiction as “Imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space and space travel”. For Brian Aldiss, Science Fiction “is a search for the definition of man and his status in the universe”; for Ursula Le Guin “a modern myth”; for Frederic Jameson “representation of the future” and for Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin “a modern conscience”.

The British and American Science Fiction questioned the patriarchal norms and destabilized the canonical entitlements to articulate the concerns of the oppressed history. Ursula Le Guin clearly delineated gender hierarchies of society in her work, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Adam Roberts outlined three categorical divisions among Science Fiction- Space Travel Science Fiction which discusses about other planets and new climes, Time Travel Science Fiction which corelates past and future and finally Technology -Oriented Science Fiction. Science Fiction also extends its interconnectivity to different subgenres like Hard Science Magazine-era Science Fiction, New Wave Science Fiction and Cyberpunk Science Fiction. From 1990’s onwards, Science Fiction transformed primarily as a medium to redefine postmodern and postcolonial elements of hybridity and in-betweenness which characterised the trivial existence of man within the globalized world.

The general representation of Science Fiction is linked with the broad arena of strange machines, technological gadgets, exotic creatures, monsters and aliens in outer space. Allegorical and metonymic devices in Science Fiction contrasts the world of imagination to the real world and articulates the notion of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ of the geographical space and environment to the readers. Thus, it generated new conceptions and perspectives of the physical universe as well as those of society. The development of Science Fiction has prioritized strong roles for women as opposing to the perceptions of the real world. Accordingly, it communicated new ideas and values concerning sex roles and the entry of women into the conventional male literary endeavour. Science Fiction is propagated as a

platform to articulate social change from the feminist perspective wherein the women writers unveiled the concealed notion of contemporary roles.

The emergence of Science Fiction as a popular genre by the women writers occurred during 1960's and 70's. Women Sci-Fi writers shifted their focus from masculine aspects of technology to personal aspects of life. Women characters popularised The Star Trek Series by avoidance of the employment of new gadgets and machines instead drew situations driven from human and social interaction. The uniqueness of these series lies in the encounter with aliens on the other planets. The eccentricity of the aliens fascinated the female world as they identified themselves with the characters who have gone through otherness. Sarah Lefanu has interconnected the parallelism between feminism and science fiction as:

Science Fiction is feminism friendly. With its metaphors of space and time travel, of parallel universe, of contradictions co-existing, of black holes and event horizons, Science Fiction is ideally placed for interrogative functions. The unities of 'self' whether in terms of bourgeois individualism or biological reductionism can be subverted. (95)

Science Fiction or Speculative Fiction unravels between time and space episodes discovering alternate lands and realms, breaks down the 'real universe' as well as the coherence of time and space. The undermining of these unities and characters are the determining mode of Science Fiction which becomes the appropriate medium for the women writers to subvert and interrogate the reality in the mainstream literature. The twin categories among the Science Fiction writers are Female and Feminist fiction writers. The writings of Marion Zimmer Bradley, Andre Norton and Ursula Le Guin are characterised as Female Fiction as they adhere to the male tradition of Science Fiction; never attempted to question the masculinist ideas and never come up with notable female characters. The writers like Doris Lessing and Ursula Le Guin attempted to portray social and political consciousness in their fiction, role played by women in the society and their concerns through Science Fiction. The feminist images of the future encounter the male dominion in Science Fiction and they represent alternate realities, interrogate the prevailing cultural and social values, attribute women the role of a perceiver than perceived, mark them as active contributors of change and interrogate the negative myths related to the patriarchal society to suppress women.

1.Utopia

The Utopian Literature and Science Fiction are bounded by the aspect of intellectual estrangement. Joanna Russ, Merge Piergy and Octavia Butler created utopian society in Science Fiction. In the words of Darko Suvin, both Utopian genre and Science Fiction are concerned with “the larger collective social and cultural machinery, socio political institutions, norms and relationships rather than individual characters or character psychology” (49). The construction of a new space and place through the use of ‘novum’ segregated the real world from the imaginative realm but it easily connects Science Fiction with Utopian genre. Wegner has clearly pointed out; “Through its use of the notion of defamiliarization, Utopian Science Fiction makes the readers critically aware of the problems of the reigning social order and deconstructs the accepted beliefs and conventions of the society leading to change and transformations” (80).

Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1975) presents the world of female population and contrasts liberal realm being experienced by self -independent women characters with the oppressed womanhood of the real world. The work explores the utopian possibilities of diversities and differences. Octavia Butler, an Afro-futurist writer construct her tales in future or other planets with interesting explorations. She employs genetic engineering as a device in *Xenogenesis* series where aliens, the Oankali save human beings from nuclear holocaust. Lilith, the protagonist in *Adulthood Rites*; “Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialisation” (80). Ursula Le Guin, a prolific writer owes to her credit the title -Grand Master of Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. *The Left Hand of Darkness* presents a world without gender where all characters go through a monthly cycle called ‘Kemmer’ and every adult become associated with a child as a parent. This notion of utopianism erases the man-woman distinction contradictory to the real world where women are oppressed on account of differences in the patriarchal society. James Tiptree Jr., actually a woman called Alice Sheldon in her story *Women Don’t See* (1973) presents women characters who do not get afraid of aliens unlike men. Merge Piergy’s *Women on the Edge of Time* (1976) represents a world without gender bias.

2. Female Revenge Fantasy

The women writers make use of revenge motif in Science Fiction to combat the male dominance. Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* portrays Janet, a law enforcement officer from all female planet plots revenge against the male antagonist. The transformation of females as agents of violence, portraying them as dangerous animals to castigate tyrannical males, transposal of patriarchal society and treating males as slaves with disrespect all come within the purview of breaking the stereotypes and conventional hierarchies.

3. Aliens

The picturisation of women as aliens in Science Fiction encapsulates the women's experience in the alternate world. As contradictory to male monstrous and violent images, alien novum incorporated by feminist Science Fiction is gender neutral or women centered or android. Russ's *The Female Man* is acknowledged with the monster. The alien character, Benaroya in Judy Scott's *Passing for Human* (1986), undergo a series of sex experiences and lesbian affair to contrast the notion of sexuality in the world.

4. Outer Space

The feminist writers make use of different nova to represent their themes and explore the aspect of alterity or otherness. Outer space is one such new aspect or novum and this is much explored in Sheri Tepper's *Grass* and Russ's *The Female Man*. The human and machine when blended create a new feminist icon in Science Fiction ie, cyborg which diminishes the boundary between Science Fiction and reality. Transmogrification is another novum used to elevate the characters in fiction. All these diverse strategies destabilize the feminine prototype that makes women believe in male domination and repression.

The interrogations of epistemology in Science Fiction are pivotal in making entitlements of subjectivity and identity. Ritch Calvin observes how women have been alienated from philosophical and scientific deliberations from the historical times but the present age acknowledges their contribution to the reformulation of the epistemological models of the world and individuals in it. Science Fiction employs different resistance modes to reach wider audience of women with an attempt to empower them. Rosinsky has stated that the Feminist Science Fiction writers "are not merely writing light, diversionary or escapist fiction but are analysing and responding to vital contemporary issues" (*Feminist Futures* 3). The transnational contours of Science Fiction integrate the whole world unveiling the limits of imagination and

carves a space for the third world population, minorities, women, subaltern and oppressed. The rapidity and impact of technological change really ventured in to the realm of science fiction creating marvels of mystery beyond horizon.

The constant interaction between science and society, science and technology has made significant achievements in areas like stem cell research, cloning in Biology, nuclear research and along with it has seriously raised the ethical questions too. No wonder the correlation of Science Fiction upon human beings has been eloquently summarised by Ursula le Guin: “If Science Fiction has a major gift to offer literature, I think it is just this: the capacity to face an open universe. Physically open, physically open. No doors shut...All the doors stand open, from the prehuman past through the incredible present to the terrible and hopeful future. All connections are possible. All alternatives are thinkable” (Wood 1976:206). The space for harmony, co-existence and humaneness are interlinked with science fiction and Jane Dona Werth truly deconstructs Science Fiction genre:

While women science fiction writers exploit the freedoms of future or alternate settings to imagine women’s lives as unconstrained, they also face particular generic problems: the cultural barriers of masculinist science, the convention of the woman as alien and the dominance of the male narrators in the genre. They write their ways around these barriers by creating Utopian sciences, by moving the woman as alien from margin to centre and by resisting the male narrator with multiple narrations or by using him to reform the males of their audiences. (Davidson & Wagner 1995: 781)

Works Cited

Aldiss, Brian W. and David Wingrove. *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973.

Baker, Brian. “Teaching Science Fiction”. *SFRA Review* 312 (Spring 2015): 7-13.

Butler, Octavia. *Adulthood Rites*. Warner Books, 1997.

Calvin, Ritch. *Feminist Science Fiction and Feminist Epistemology*. Palgrave, 2016.

Darko, Suvin. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. Yale U.P, 1979.

Disch, Thomas M. *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*. Free Press, 1998.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso, 2005.

Lefanu, Sarah. *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction*. Women's press, 1988.

Le Guin, Ursula. "Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction." *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Ed. Susan Wood and Ursula K Le Guin. London: Women's Press, 1989.

Rosinsky, Natalie M. *Feminist Futures: Contemporary Women's Speculative Fictions*. UMI Research Press, 1984.

Scholes, Robert and Eric S. Rabkin. *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. vii.

The Oxford English Dictionary. "Science Fiction". p. 968, 1968.

Wegner, Philip. "Utopia". Ed. Seed, 79 – 94.

Westfahl, Gary. *Science Fiction, Children's Literature and Popular Culture: Coming of Age in Fantasyland*. Greenwood Press, 2000.

Wood, Susan. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The Women's Press, 1979.

Donawerth, Jane. Quoted in Davidson & Wagner 1995: 781.

http://www.epitomejournals.com/VolumeArticles/FullTextPDF/15_Research_Paper.pdf