

## WOMEN IN SCIENCE FICTION AND FEMINISM

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### ABSTRACT

*Science fiction as a literary genre has generally been regarded as a male realm since the stories were written by men, featured male heroes and were aimed at a male readership. There was the occasional woman writer taking up the task of writing a science fiction story, but that was not often enough. It was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that women writers began to enter the genre in earnest and women protagonists began to populate the pages of the genre. This paper provides a brief overview of the treatment of gender in science fiction. It will present some of the most important images of women that the genre has offered over the years and also discuss the impact of the second wave of feminism.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Gender, Feminism, Science Fiction*

### INTRODUCTION

Science fiction has popularly been conceived as male territory. From its beginnings in the stories published in the pulp magazines of the early to mid-twentieth century to the emergence of feminist science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s, the genre featured boys' adventure stories. A survey of the genre from its earliest stories and novels demonstrates that women have almost always been 'invisible' as writers, characters, and readers of science fiction or SF - as it is more popularly known. That this is true in all forms of literature, whether mainstream or popular, as well as other manifestations of culture, has been recognized by critics and scholars. In her book *Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture (1911)*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman points to this fact. She argues that fiction "has not given any true picture of woman's life, very little of human life, and a disproportionate section of man's life" (102). For a long time, science fiction, too, excluded women from the overall picture or relegated them to the sidelines. It was only after the Women's Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s that things began to change. This paper traces the development in the roles that women have played as characters, writers, and readers of science fiction over the years.

### WOMEN AS CHARACTERS IN SF

One of the major concerns that the Women's Movement addressed was the representation of women in popular culture. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique (1963)* was one of the earliest and most important works in this area. Many other critics and scholars soon began to focus on how the images of women found in popular culture are, in fact, men's images of women, and not women's images of themselves. In her article 'The Image of Women in Science

Fiction' published in 1971, Joanna Russ, another popular SF writer, and feminist scholar, writes that "there are plenty of images of women in science fiction. There are hardly any women" (Qt. in Lefanu 13). Russ recognized that the images of women in science fiction reflect women as seen by men. Though most writers were concerned with showing a two-sexed world, no one was interested in working out the possibilities of a truly equal society. Much before Russ's observation, Kingsley Amis had written that through science fiction's most important use was to dramatize "social inquiry" and also provide "a fictional mode in which cultural tendencies can be isolated and judged" (54), there was a strange lack of experimentation around sex and that while all else may vary, male/female relationships stay the same. He explains that "though it may go against the grain to admit it, science fiction writers are evidently satisfied with the sexual status quo" (99).

This lack of concern for the imbalance in the representation of the sexes is evident in most of the SF writers and critics. Therefore, it follows that early SF had very few examples of women characters, leave alone woman protagonists. When women did feature in these stories, they were invariably portrayed as either "squeaking dolls subjected to instant rape by monsters – or old-maid scientists desexed by hypertrophy of the intellectual organs – or, at best, loyal little wives or mistresses of accomplished heroes". Most often, these female characters were "quite brainless" with their only function being to say "Oh? and Ooh! To the clever and resourceful hero"(LeGuin, 97-98).

One of the earliest examples of SF's masculinist orientation is Lester del Ray's 'Helen O' Loy' (1938). The short story narrates the tale of a robot whose name is derived from a combination of Helen of Troy and Helen made of alloy. She is a perfect housewife- learns about romance from the television soap operas, cooks, cleans, looks after her "husband-inventor". The story, according to Veronica Hollinger "participates in Western culture's long-standing marginalization of women ... assumes that the social roles played by women and men as women and men are historical, that they will remain largely unchanged even in the distant future" (126).

Helen Merrick identifies two major traditions in early SF: the depiction of the 'alien' as the 'Other' and the depiction of societies in which traditional societies are overturned and where 'women rule'. In the former, "the 'alien' could signify everything that was 'other' to the dominant audience of middle-class, young white Western males – including women, people of color, other nationalities, classes and sexualities" (243). Similarly, in 'Woman Dominant' stories, or as Joanna Russ terms it 'Battle of the Sexes' Stories ('Amor' 2), women is portrayed as threats to the gendered order. In Thomas Gardner's 'The Last Woman' (1932), an all-male 'Science Civilization' is left with only one woman and even she is ultimately executed. Both these traditions were harmful to women and their search for the depiction of positive and empowering images of women in science fiction.

## WOMEN AS WRITERS IN SF

Kathryn Weibl draws a connection between the type of images presented and whether they are created by men or women, in her 1977 book *Mirror, Mirror: Images of women reflected in popular culture*:

When this premise is explored in the context of the present paper, it is found that pre-feminist science fiction has only a few women writers who were actively writing stories and novels. Sarah Lefanu observes in her book *Feminism and Science Fiction* (1988), what was lacking in early twentieth- and mid-twentieth century SF was "women-identified women as writers and readers" (2). During the 1930s and 1940s, a few women writers like C. L. Moore and Leigh Brackett

assumed a male voice and non-gender specific names. This was done in order to avoid prejudice on the part of editors and readers. As Jacqueline Pearson observes, while male writers of science fiction often produce traditional views of gender, even while apparently questioning “natural” social arrangements, female writers show their usual chameleon ability to “accommodate themselves to traditional androcentric models, and yet simultaneously to subvert these modes from within” (11). The space adventure, science fiction by C. L. Moore and Leigh Brackett did not do much to challenge the ‘space opera’ conventions of much of the 1930s and 1940s; in which the protagonist may be a woman, but the politics of gender do not change.

Referring to C.L. Moore, as “the most interesting of early female chameleons”, Pearson notes how even though Moore made use of a male-identified narrative voice, “her stories reveal peculiarly female preoccupations as well as a sharp awareness of what was going on in the real world” (Ibid.). ‘Shambleau’, one of Moore’s most important stories, has her regular hero, Northwest Smith, save a ‘berry-brown girl ...sweet and submissive and demure’ from a mob (Qt. in Pearson 11). However, as the story unravels, she turns out to be Medusa, and the ‘natural’ balance between the sexes is reversed. Through the depiction of the Shambleau in a phallic role, Moore lets her usurp the dominant role and as a contrast, it is Northwest Smith who is shown in a submissive role. The tale ends with the destruction of the Shambleau, and the triumph of the no-longer tough male hero, who has to take the help of other men to defeat the ‘alien’. The story is significant as it is a powerful depiction of female sexuality that diminishes the hero’s masculinity and reduces him to submissiveness (Pearson 11; Merrick 244). It was not until the advent of feminist writers that this tradition was challenged and women began to be portrayed with positive characteristics.

## WOMEN AS READERS OF SF

Judith Fetterley’s groundbreaking analysis of certain American fictional works by male writers, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978), takes a hard look at their intent, content, and impact on women readers. According to her, “literature is political” and it has “impalpable designs” on the female reader (xi). This is because, the male is considered as the Universal, while the female is incidental or secondary. Fetterley observes:

This predominantly male bias is found not only in mainstream literature but also in all the genres of popular literature, whether American or not. Science fiction was no exception to this bias. That there have always been women readers of science fiction has been pointed out by the feminist critic Susan Wood in her article ‘Women and Science Fiction’. However, she observes, these women readers also had to become one of the “boys” and read as “boys/men” and not as women (10). Adam Roberts points out that “from the dawn of SF ... through to the end of the 1950s, the female audience for SF was small, and those women who were interested in reading it did so with a sense of themselves as alienated or at least sidelined spectators” (71).

According to Sarah Lefanu, SF reflected “masculine concerns” until the 1960s and 1970s as the stories and novels were written before the feminist intervention was based around the central theme of space exploration and the development of technology, and access to these areas was effectively denied to women in the real world (3). Traditionally, SF has been considered a predominantly masculine field which, “through its focus on science and technology, ‘naturally’ excludes women and by implication, considerations of gender” (Merrick 241).

In her scrupulously researched work *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (2002), Justine Larbalestier argues that women were definitely present in the genre as readers, writers, and fans. However, the widespread conviction that there was almost no significant participation by women in SF before the 1970s is due to the marginalization of women in the SF community as a whole since marginality leads to invisibility. Though women were very active in SF fandom, their presence was not acknowledged very often. Jeanne Gomoll, in her 'An Open Letter to Joanna Russ' published in *Aurora*, winter 1986, refers to how her own experiences of SF fandom have been written out of history (Qtd. In Lefanu 6). Sarah Lefanu also agrees that women's past activities are being denied or ignored (7).

## THE WINDS OF CHANGE

The 1950s saw a gradual change emerging in SF, as the genre began to engage with social-cultural concerns. Helen Merrick calls this change "a more engaged awareness of contemporary issues around sex, gender roles, race and ecology" (244). A number of writers tried to resolve the 'Battle of the Sexes' through some form of equality. Examples are Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance* (1951), Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth's *Search the Sky* (1954), John Wyndham's 'Consider her Ways', (1956) and Robert Silverberg's 'Woman's World' (1957). Similarly, female characters began to be depicted as being capable of carrying out 'men's work'. Isaac Asimov's Robot series portrayed Dr. Susan Calvin, as a 'female man', while Robert Heinlein portrayed independent, intelligent and competent female characters in his novels like *Tunnel in the Sky* (1955) and *Have Spacesuit Will Travel* (1958).

## THE SECOND WAVE OF FEMINISM AND SF

The term 'feminism' can be used to describe a political, cultural, or economic movement that is aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political, cultural and sociological theories, as well as philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference. It is also a movement that campaigns for women's rights and interests. In the 1840s, the women's rights movements, called the 'First Wave of Feminism,' had started to emerge in the United States and Britain with the emergence of women's suffrage movements. However, even before the emergence of organized suffrage movements, women and men had been writing about the inequalities and injustices in women's social condition and campaigning to change it. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Woman* (1869) and Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family* (1884) were some of the most important works which influenced the movement.

In the twentieth century, the 'women's movement' of the 1960s, also called Second-wave feminism, and sometimes 'women's liberation,' was a "renewal of an old tradition and thought already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality in society, and (in some cases) proposed solutions" (Barry 121). In addition to the books mentioned earlier, others like Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labor* (1911), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) were also influential in shaping the movement. The central focus of the second wave was on total gender equality - women as a group having the same social, political, legal, and economic rights that men have. Writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter established the groundwork for the dissemination of feminist theories dovetailed with the American Civil Rights movement. One of the major theoretical projects of the second wave of feminism is the investigation of gender and sexuality as social constructs, thus posing a challenge to notions of a natural law regulating feminine behavior and an innate female that describes and circumscribes 'woman.'

## SF AND FEMINISM

The genre of science fiction when used for feminist purposes opens up a whole range of possibilities to interrogate gender as a social and cultural construct. The stock conventions of SF like – time travel, alternate worlds, entropy, relativism, etc., – can be used metaphorically and metonymically as powerful ways of exploring the construction of “woman”. Pamela Sargent writes that the best fantastic literature and the most profound feminism have this in common: “they are subversive, continuously challenging the accepted wisdom of the tribe whilst seeking change and a new way of understanding and viewing the world” (135).

According to Sharon Ben-Tov, science fiction “has given women writers the freedom to discover new stories and has gained an enthusiastic readership, not only among regular fans, but also among people attracted to the genre because it depicts women in innovative ways” (136). She elaborates that the science fiction world was one in which:

The 1960s and 1970s, with its ‘second-wave feminism’, changed the SF genre and brought more women into active participation as readers and writers. Sarah Lefanu claims that because of the feminist intervention, women writers have been able to “draw on the possibilities opened up by an important strand within science fiction that is in opposition to the dominant ideology, that, rather than celebrating imperialistic and militaristic glory, is subversive, satirical, iconoclastic” (Lefanu 4).

## FEMINIST SF WRITERS

The SF written by women during the late 1960s and 1970s shows very clearly how a political vision can become an integral part of the imagination; how important, in other words, politics is to art. They also show the energy of ideas coming out of the women’s liberation movement of this period and how immediate was their influence on writing. These women and many others were reading books like Shulamite Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* and Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful* and participating in consciousness-raising sessions with other women. As their own awareness matured, their perceptions began to change and this change is evident in their writing, that is, in the fictional worlds created by them.

According to Sarah Lefanu, “Feminism questions a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms” (100). The stories and novels of some of the major women science fiction writers like James Tiptree Jr. or Alice Sheldon, Ursula K. LeGuin, Suzy McKee Charnas and Joanna Russ, express, in different ways, “the conjuncture of politics and imagination” (Lefanu 101). The books by these writers are fired by a political vision coming from the heart of the women’s liberation movement, one that is transformed by the power of their imagination into a rich and complex fiction. Most importantly, the vision is not presented to the reader to be passively consumed. They explore the possibilities, but offer no solutions. As Helen Merrick points out: The 1970s mark a high point in SF’s engagement with gender, with the publication of a significant group of texts ...these self-consciously feminist works consistently challenge and disrupt the perceived ‘naturalness’ of gender and locate the operation and proliferation of the more harmful effects of the gendered order deep within the political and cultural institutions of contemporary society (247-8).

Some of the most important works of this period, which treat the question of gender are Ursula K. LeGuin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), James Tiptree Jr.’s ‘The Women Men Don’t See’ (1973), ‘Houston, Houston, Do You Read?’ (1976), Suzy McKee Charnas’s *Motherlines* (1978), Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* (1977), Marge Piercy’s

*Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), etc. While all these novels deal with gender, the approaches to this problem are different. However, what is similar is the notion that gender is socially produced, thus challenging taken-for-granted structures which reinforce gender binaries. Most importantly, these stories present extended families or communal life as alternatives to the nuclear family and parenting is shared amongst numerous 'mothers' who may be female or male (Merrick 248).

## CONCLUSIONS

The importance of cultural productions like the arts and literature in bringing about a change in consciousness and culture, cannot be stressed enough (Stimpson, 120) and it is in this area that some of the most important works of science fiction by feminist writers have played a very significant role. Their stories and novels take basic feminist issues like gender /sex roles, reproduction, motherhood, etc., and explore societies which are structured without sexual or gender hierarchies. These works question social gender constructs of what women "are" and postulate what women "should be," thereby putting power into women's hands. They challenge the very issue of power, what Fetterley refers to as "the issue in the politics of literature". The changes brought about by feminism have encouraged more and more women writers to enter the field, and now, the contemporary scenario in SF offers challenging and invigorating possibilities for women who can find themselves as protagonists, writers, and readers.

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