

Feminism and Science Fiction – a Challenge of Gender Norms

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Abstract: *Feminist science fiction is a subgenre of science fiction that presents different feminist themes in an effort to deconstruct traditional gender roles and expose different societies, even different futures. It is markedly different from most formal mainstream SF (living and working with robots, exploring the universe) but the fiction is still present. Among the topics that are debated in this subgenre are: gender, sexuality, (questioning the) patriarchy, the right on one's own body, race, class. For example, a novel like *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin tries to explain the fluidity of gender, while *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood points out the oppression of women regarding their reproductive capabilities in a dominant male society. Even though there seems to be a distinction between the two directions of the same subgenre, feminism (with female authors) and science fiction (with male authors), both function as a critique to contest the current processes of exclusion/ power relations and envision an alternative world. The presentation will be concerned with a brief history of feminist SF and the reasons why it has become such a valuable addition to the SF subgenre and a weapon of criticism of the present-day society.*

Keywords: *feminism, science fiction, criticism of the present-day society, gender roles, fluidity of gender*

When we discuss about feminism and science fiction, we tend to think in different directions. For the feminist field, we can imagine the female authors writing about their beliefs, thoughts, ideas and for the science fiction field, we can see the male authors writing about how they image the future alongside robots, exploring the universe and how technology will conquer or work with us. But if we combine these two genres, we will discover a subgenre that opens our eyes, called feminist science fiction. The feminist approaches to this kind of genre started describing the American society in the 1950's-1970's pointing out the changes that took place at that time: feminist movements, joining or re-entering the workplace field (WW2), multicultural society, the civil rights movements etc. These events guided the society to a “weird” notion or future: a new world where men and women are equal and treated the same. Feminist science fiction is a significant subgenre and should be taken into account and studied seriously because it offers us a unique image, a space where we can image how patriarchal system does not dominate the entire world and we live in harmony. By placing women and other marginalized genders at the center of speculative narratives, feminist science fiction managed to break this image of traditional tropes that have long relegated women (being attributed passive or secondary roles).

Even if the title “feminist science fiction” can lead to a different direction, we should understand that the fiction is present and the science less. Science fiction is a genre of speculative fiction that presents different cultures and addresses issues of gender and sexuality by setting stories in the future (post-apocalyptic, parallel universes), somehow making it a genre that is strictly limited to the imagination and realism of the relationships surrounding technology, economy, politics or religion, focusing more on globalization of technical modernization and cosmic frontiers being conquered, while feminist science fiction

writers uses such futures as reflections of the present world or its possible transformation, where technology is used to portray gender and power relations. At its core, feminist science fiction is driven by two key goals: both to critique the representation of women and other oppressed groups by mainstream sci-fi and to employ the nature of sci-fi as a genre by conceiving different societies in which oppressive patriarchy is erased or reconfigured. Even if it might be too directly or harsh when it comes to how the authors want to present the plot, feminist science fiction can be read as a critical and subversive tool to reveal how the socially constructed adaptation of society's premises talk about the integrity of the female body or gender binarism, challenging traditional concepts and providing a new understanding of women's bodies and technologies, giving them new meanings and extending their functions. By combining scientific imagination with the cultural concerns of women, this subgenre reflects the evolution of gender relations in modern society and promotes social attention to them.

Often using utopian or dystopian themes to create new post-gender frameworks from multiple alternative natures, these female authors are showing us how many female characters have special powers but still struggle for independence. Utopian feminist science fiction writers imagine societies where gender no longer plays a central role and equality between genders was achieved. Interesting to analyze, this topic of gender issues started from the 1915, when female author Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her novel *Herland*, marking it as the earliest example of feminist utopia, an example of society where women had achieved harmony, peace and technological advancement without any help from men. After 70 years, in 1985, Ursula K. Le Guin published her novel *Always Coming Home*, describing how the post-patriarchal societies are now in harmony with the environment and focuses on cooperation, not on domination. On the other side, dystopian feminist SF often portrays worlds where patriarchal power has intensified, resulting in extreme forms of oppression and inequality. The speculative imagination and subsequent exploration of issues of everyday life, past history and imagined futures often risk essentialism. However, feminist science fiction poses its own unique challenges to gender normativity. "Science fiction offered a perfect getaway vehicle for these writers [...] where female characters enjoyed equal rights or where these female characters could fight and win. [...] What is important is that they gave their female characters possibility, and there is power in characters that have possibility." [Hamparian, 2017: 10] Matrix of this subgenre is that it has an opportunity to proliferate the concept of gender, to break them and allowed for the questioning of the gender roles imposed by a patriarchal society. Feminist science fiction has its roots way back to the canonical texts such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* published in 1985. This work of art was seen as something revolutionary for that period of time but also for the present-days, women being connected to each other and referencing their lives with the ones that the handmaid's had in the novel. Atwood's disturbing vision is immediately applicable, strengthening the case for the continued analysis of and struggle against the injustice assumed by feminist science fiction. These features allow writers to discuss quite real feminist issues in terms of entertaining hypotheticals, which challenges its readers to think about the implications of sexism. Through creation of the new worlds, or criticizing the existing ones, feminist science fiction displaces gender roles, thus questioning the authenticity of patriarchy.

Feminist science fiction has been prolific within the genre and a powerful influence in shaping feminist discourse. Through literature, it has introduced a broader context for numerous voices to be heard, many which were previously silenced or minimized. And even if we have this positive image of Wonder Woman that continues to exist, every feminist propensity, no matter how thin, acquires real political weight and becomes an ideological argument which further strengthens women's content and identity. With the new feminist attitudes, female science fiction writers create characters that become less fantastical and focus more on expressing their desires, quests and expectations. Most of the time, members of the LGBTQ community, as well as people of color, have had their identities re-acted into the public sphere through feminist science fiction. Much of feminist science fiction has also defined new roles for women and how Simone de Beauvoir said in her 1949 book entitled *The Second Sex* "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient (One is not born, but rather becomes, woman)". [Beauvoir, 2010: 14] Through its interrogation of these bedrock presumptions about gender and power, these feminist writers promote critical thinking by creating a space where we can imagine different realities from our own, societies that might be less patriarchal than their real-world counterparts, challenging conventional gender roles and envisioned groundbreaking possibilities for gender and power and, also, they offer the possibility for new writers of tackling pressing feminist issues, which creates a dynamic and influential force in both literature and society. Another interesting aspect would be about the intersectional feminist discourse, that has been offered by professor Kimberle Crenshaw at the end of 1989, where she began to define the concept of intersectionality for the first time in the article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" in the University of Chicago Legal Forum: "[...] Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated." [Crenshaw, 1989: 140] Through the analysis of the gender, race, class and sexuality, feminist writers provide multifaceted cultural comments on the oppressive power relations in people's lives and in the culture at large. It is intriguing to explore how this form of science fiction is in constant evolution and embraces a vast spectrum of themes and concerns. Generally, it can be argued that, alongside contributing to literature and the growth of the genre of the science fiction, feminist science fiction has greatly enriched the thought and discourse of feminism and still represents an important area for discussing the possible changes and new roles of gender and society.

Despite presenting and analyzing different issues, the one that had a strong impact and started being discussed much often is the one regarding the gender, how men were, are and will always be "top tier" compared to women that should "know their limits", should "focus only on the house duties and children" and are "over reacting to different topics". When it comes to traditional gender roles, everyone expects women to obey and do what they have to do, and by that, feminist science fiction writers portray societies where gender is fluid or irrelevant. This theme allows writers to question the fixed categories of "male" and "female", challenging binary conceptions of gender and promoting a more expansive understanding of human identity. Gender and sexuality in feminist science fiction are pliable and outgoing categories that are in the process of being produced, negotiated and transformed through imaginative lenses, which in turn allows authors to challenge and subvert the basic

presuppositions regarding the gendered workings of power in the actual world. Commenting on the roles that female had, unfortunately, these roles were attributed from the ancient times. Women were portrayed as easy to manipulate, exploitable, witches, housewives, even the “argument” that “even worse if she’s a blonde”. After many years where women were seen as I mentioned earlier, somehow, this “easy to manipulate” image changed into something better. Because of the comic books or computer-animated heroines that had appeared, society started to look and treat women a little bit better. For a critical analysis, it is sufficient to focus on this aspect against the background of leadership, power and role construction. The best feminism and the best science fiction can utilize the potential within these possibilities to challenge the norms that limit humans to being their fullest and most realized selves. By using the unconditional possibilities and the challenges that these two unique points of view (science fiction and feminism) have, they can bring the future in an indeed a place of potential change, liberation and normalization. Feminist fiction has been seen as being of vital importance for expanding and challenging traditional concepts about gender, redefining and re-evaluating such concepts, furthering the emancipation of women from traditional social roles and of illuminating the various ways in which gender has an impact on the lives of individuals. Feminist SF may offer a critical account of contemporary society as refracted through SF tropes, re-envision the role of women and present possible environments in which they can thrive alternatives that may provide a guide to the alterations necessary in the present.

One of the many feminists’ science fiction writers that decided to talk about this gender issues and managed to twist our minds (in a good way) in the 60’s was Ursula K. Le Guin with her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). Aside from its complex plot, this novel is a classic example of how gender is not important, how gender is not the dominant point in (a different) world. This theme of gender fluidity is a reaction to the anti-feminism that has insisted on binary gender and sexual orientation as the norm and offers a broader understanding of human subjectivity. In this specular perspective, Le Guin’s subverts expectations of the genders, it is therefore also a critique on the construction of gender that is taken for granted in our society. This technique highlights the changeability of gendered categories and invites readers to imagine a world where such distinctions are no longer meaningful. These reimagined conceptions of gender and sexuality not only challenge traditional patriarchal systems but also create space for more inclusive and fluid understandings of identity. By exploring worlds where gender is not a determining factor in one’s identity or social status, feminist science fiction writers open up new possibilities for thinking about equality and personal freedom. The novel problematizes the notion of “essential” male and female identity and reveals how many aspects of gendered organization are not innate, but cultural. Therefore, by using queering sexuality, feminist science fiction writers’ challenges and subverts the heteropatriarchal narrative while presenting various gay and lesbian relationships. In these novels, queerness is not just endured or embraced but sometimes even valued as a normal and unremarkable part of existence. Another important writer would be Margaret Atwood and her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Published in 1985, Atwood gathered different stories from all around the world, created and presented a world that seemed to be too straight forward for that period of time, but very important these days (especially with what is going on now in Afghanistan). The story is told by Offred, a

handmaid, who is seen and treated only as a breeding tool for the privileged people in the society, exploring how patriarchy distorts and manipulates religion and the law to divest women of their power. Political, religious, and military structure in Gilead is under the power and control of men: Commanders and Eyes. Women's resistance, however, either takes the form of subtlety in inner rebellion, as in Offred, or overt, as with the attempted escape by Moira; their potential to strike back is too minor under this repressive regime. Atwood's dystopia shows us the implications of patriarchy rule and Le Guin's break away from the oppressive system of male-female binary gender roles. Even though *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* are conceptually very different, they are both very interested in deconstructing gender roles. Both Atwood's and Le Guin's works present female oppression under the gendered regimes and they make a waking up call for the readers to be aware of the cultural categories and changes that may occur one day. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* show that the freedom of feminist science fiction writers represents the response against traditional gender roles. While improving the female experience in literary studies, these texts provoke reflection in society and encourage readers/viewers conceptual capacity for changing the reality they live in.

As time went by, the feminist science fiction writers of the 21st century continued to talk and reflect on the issues that were attributed to the third-wave feminism, regarding the gender fluidity, bodily integrity and the impact of technology on identity. Some of the contemporary feminist science fictions writers, and I would like to mention N.K. Jemisin, Kameron Hurley and Ann Leckie, have carried the legacy that their predecessors while introducing new themes and perspectives, since the audience advances alongside technology. For example, N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy explores themes of survival, environmental collapse and oppression, from a female point of view, or Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013) novel that is similar to Le Guin's novel because it is also reflecting and challenges the traditional gender roles, where characters are referred by gender-neutral pronouns. Even if this subgenre started to fight for combating gender roles and patriarchy for a safe and normal society, the classic writers wanted us, from readers to writers, to have the power to change the course of history, to imagine alternatives futures and critique the limitations that both science fiction and feminist movements had. It encourages us to think critically and demand for change, for a better and equal world, to fight against the structures that power has, even if we speak about the literary or real world. By imagining speculative futures where technology either unleashes or oppresses marginalized groups, feminist science fiction encourages the critical reflection on the relationship between technology, power and gender.

Feminist science fiction can play a significant role in society, not only in literature but also in medicine, justice and among many areas of living where men do not share equally (with women) the consequences of social and institutional frameworks. In general, and it's sad to think about it, men have assumed a simple advantage: women are taken in account only when something has to be done for them or about them, nothing more and nothing less. Feminist science fiction have their aces in their pockets, because of the freedom they have to explore ideas and to create as many futures/ worlds/ characters they want, can illustrate the need for consideration and can act as a medium to discuss the potentials and opportunities of an equal world where every perspective is important and where the whole is represented by

more than just the most obvious majority. By doing that, it can illustrate that not only is it possible to accommodate and celebrate differences and variety in society, but it projects that the benefits of change to an open-minded society can be achieved. Combining all these details mentioned, it can be demonstrated that this difference does not represent a crime or something out of its place and these differences, in fact, should be the right of every person and should be seen as a source of societal strength rather than a division. And after many years, where comics, books, films were dominated by the male power image, female characters such as Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, She-Hulk, Jane Foster and many more had their rise in fame and became very popular. We are getting accustomed to brave, serious, strong and independent women who are welcome everywhere, where they can do anything, can wear any clothes and it is not a question “she’s a woman, she can really do that?”. An optimal hero in science fiction is a brave, intelligent and a serious person with special skills, who is able to save the world as a result of the special qualities she or he possesses. Such books do not conform to the traditional explanation of gender norms. A book becomes “gender-free” and more intense for such reasons. Also, such books really help to destroy ancient gender laws, that I hope they will dissolve someday, and such stories inspire people to do something unconventional and/ or unusual.

In conclusion, by questioning gender norms, science fiction, in general, and early feminist science fiction, in particular, raise crucial universal questions. Feminist criticism, whether in literature, the humanities or social sciences, focuses not only on male dominance and female submission narratives but also on the actual mechanics of these narratives. It represents the wishes, dreams and aspirations of majority groups that share similar cultural and social backgrounds and often serves to build and consolidate the common interests and identities. Feminist criticism is always available for discussions based on the differences and with that, women who represents the historical “minority”, are still the most powerful “minority”.

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