A Short History of Femininity in American Science Fiction

Aynur Kaso
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University of Skopje
aynurkaso@gmail.com

ABSTRACT This paper aims to propose an interpretation of femininity in American science fiction. Following a chronological layout, I endeavour to generate a timeline of model works which are considered essential for the development of the genre. Initially I develop my own definition of science fiction and signify its place in the literary history. Moreover, I point out the most significant works which put the issue of femininity in question. It is inevitable to compare male and female writers' approach on this topic; therefore, I will provide a short observation on whether the writer's gender influences the work's tone. By referring to feminist literary theory, first I will try to define the traditional notion of femininity and will try to diverge from it. Postmodernist and poststructuralist thoughts are used as a theoretical basis in order to carry out a literary analysis of *the other*, *the alien*, and *the cyborg* in science fiction works and their resemblance to women's position in a patriarchal world. Finally, I attempt to predict the development of this topic in the future.

KEYWORDS gender, science fiction, femininity, literary theory, gender

1. INTRODUCTION

The abundance of intriguing and thought-provoking topics has always been ubiquitous in the sphere of science fiction. The history of thinking has always gone hand in hand with the prophetic vision that science fiction offers, where the very essential and fundamental questions of human existence have echoed through the vast abstruseness of the future, and the pitch-black, impenetrable sky. It is not very long ago that science fiction was established as a literary genre, although depending on the definition one would acknowledge, we can follow the trail of its pristine existence in the early ages. When it comes to its characteristics as a literary genre, as in many genres, in its primal years, science fiction was a sphere substantially dominated by male authors and readers. Due to its connection to technological advancements, the possibility of space and time travel, creating artificial intelligence with a close intellect to human beings, its themes were mainly considered "masculine"[1]. The majority of early SF[2] authors are men, and as a consequence, many women willing to write in the same genre had to hide behind pseudonyms with the desire of being acknowledged by the readers and critics.

My aim will be to follow a chronological layout and generate a timeline of model works which are considered essential for the development of the genre. In order to do that, I will first create my own definition of science fiction and then point out the most significant works that call the topic of femininity into question. It is inevitable to compare male and female writers' approach on this topic; therefore, I will present a short observation on whether the writer's gender influences the work's tone. By referring to feminist literary theory, first I will try to define the traditional notion of femininity and will try to diverge from it. Postmodernist and poststructuralist thoughts are used as a theoretical basis in order to carry out a literary analysis of *the other*, *the alien*, and *the cyborg* in science fiction works and their resemblance to women's position in a patriarchal world. Finally, I will attempt to predict the development of this topic in the future.

2. WHY THIS TOPIC?

From the time that we see the traces of first stories written in this genre until today, SF has proved to be a permanent field, a field so complex that we can discuss themes varying from psychological interpretations of the human existence to tackling the laws of the universe. That is why gender has become an essential thing to discuss in the scope of SF. In his book *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction*, Brian Attebery (2002, 4) states that "the genre's storytelling conventions encourage writers to ask questions about the biological basis of sexual division and allow them to explore alternative formulations of society and the individual psyche." Taking it as a starting point, I intend to explore femininity in American SF, especially due to the fact that one could see the genre's most diverse representation in the great range of works published by American authors.

3. DEFINING SOME IMPORTANT TERMS

Reaching the conclusion on whether a work should be considered science fiction or not is not a straightforward task. If we were to ask some renowned SF authors, we would get answers incredibly different answers. While some consider it a very unserious genre, the others believe that it has a very big role in most of the revolutionary inventions done in the last couple of centuries. I maintain that science fiction represents a fertile land for metaphor systems mainly focused on the relationship between humans and scientific development on plausible settings and due to its prophetic potency, it is a *praxis* and *poiesis*. That is, SF is both a process and the making, it is tightly connected to the real-life representation of all the developments that are tackled within the genre's borders. Be it scientific inventions or exploring the psychology of an unknown species. The flexibility of the genre to reflect on many issues brings us to the distinction of feminism, femaleness and femininity as three important terms. According to Toril Moi (1989), feminism is a political position, femaleness is a matter of biology, and femininity is a set of culturally defined characteristics.

If we look at these terms in a group, we would realise that femaleness is the most fundamentally nature-given characteristic and triggers the binary point of view together with maleness. Feminism is the newest concept in the group and being a political position it has its own definition, manifest, and ideology. One can usually choose to become a feminist or not whereas one cannot naturally change their femaleness to something else. And thirdly, if we look at femininity we would see a cultural concept, a thing defined by the society having the social constructs as a basis.

4. WHAT IS THE AUTHOR'S ROLE IN ALL OF THIS?

SF was generally considered a masculine genre due to its historical background and the audience it mostly attracted. However, recent decades proved that this is not a good generalization to make as the female voice started to be heard much more than before. Mainly with the rise of new wave science fiction in the 60s, the genre evolved into a fertile land for metaphor systems that started to discuss 'softer' topics such as the human condition in the vast universe. Thus, it was inevitable to introduce the psychological and biological reactions to speculative situations. It is exactly this period when we start to classify some works as being speculative fiction and even feminist science fiction all thanks to some female authors who tackled topics of immaculate interest. One could not easily propose that the author's gender affects the work's tone, however we can conclude that the majority of the authors who brought a change to the genre's core were women.

5. THE OTHER, THE ALIEN, THE CYBORG

When trying to draw parallels between SF and its relation to femininity, the proposed arguments can be built on three pillars: *the other*, *the alien* and *the cyborg*. These three concepts enable us to build metaphors within a system of metaphors.

5.1. THE OTHER

In a world dominated by binaries, we have the norm and we have *the other*. Every major philosophy, religion, culture is built on this unwritten rule. If we consider masculinity as the norm, as it is considered in all patriarchal societies, we would automatically accept femininity as *the other*. Thus, if we consider human as the norm, we would take everything else as *the other*. The treatment of androids, aliens and genetically modified humans in most SF works is directly connected to this being discriminated against and excluded way of treatment.

The future presented in Philip K. Dick's 1968 *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is quite different from today's world. However, the gender roles in the society stay intact. Men still occupy the more active sphere of society, while it is usual for women to be housewives or secretaries. Dick (1968) creates a world where androids, i.e. replicants, have been so improved that it is almost impossible to differentiate between them and humans. And yet, society has manipulated technology to such advanced magnitude that the robots are used as updated sex dolls. This leads to the question how ethical a love relationship between a human and a replicant could be, given the fact that replicants lack empathy. And yet Rachael Rosen, who is a gynoid, an android designed to look like a woman, is a femme fatale and her sexual power is the most feminine thing ever. Hayles (1999, 161) proposes another definition for a character like Rachel Rosen as she calls her a "schizoid android", a term used to define a usually female character that is smart, distant and lacks emotionality. Affect and empathy are foreign terms to these characters; in fact, they are on the verge of human or robot because of this (Hayles 1999). This is what complicates things in the novel. For Hayles (1999, 162), "gender dynamics is central to these complexities, for when the schizoid woman is brought into close proximity with a male character, he reacts to the androidism in her personality by experiencing a radical instability in the boundaries that define him and his world." Thus, *the other* is the one that stirs the balance between man and his world.

On the other hand, in *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin (1969) we have a different situation. The story takes place on Gethen, a planet inhabited by an androgynous species, Gethenians, who acquire either a male or a female sexual identity only during the phase of kemmer, which is the Gethenians' way of sexual intercourse. The genius of *The Left Hand of Darkness* is on its brave vision of a genderless alien society, and yet on linguistic level it fails to accomplish its potential. One of the basic linguistic issues is the usage of personal pronouns as Gethenians are referred to as he/his/him. Due to this, her androgynous character seems like "a male default that occasionally showcases essentialist characteristics of the female gender" (Stephenson 2016, 8). In fact, in her essay *Is Gender Necessary?* Le Guin (1989) wholeheartedly accepts the criticism and denotes that not being in favour of inventing new pronouns, she should have used the generic singular they/them/their instead. *The Left Hand of Darkness* makes us realise the importance of the language used in the way it can create *the other*, or fail to create it if it cannot escape the traps of patriarchy.

The other is not always the female. Most of the time, being agender or/and asexual is even worse according to the patriarchal standards, because that does not fit in the binary system. *Aye, and Gomorrah* by Samuel R. Delany (1967) takes place in an unidentifiable future where the world has been introduced to a modified class of people, known as spacers, who are chosen from children whose sexual responses are hopelessly retarded at puberty and are made asexual so that they can work in space without any probability of radiation affecting their genes, and lineage. Moreover, another group called frelks are human beings who worship spacers and are attracted to their androgynous traits. Written in an era when homosexuality was still considered an illness, Delany (1967) chooses a setting where homosexuality is no longer a taboo in the society, but this time the spacers are a minority both admired and unwanted. While we can assume the society has improved by accepting homosexuals as "normal" human beings, we are stricken by the exclusion of spacers. This prolific short story lays the general conception of *the other* in the society bare. Therefore, *the other* is not a locked term, but it alters according to what a binary dominated society would need.

5.2. THE ALIEN

Moreover, not only is femininity considered *the other*, it is also considered *the alien* gender. Similar to *the other* which is encompassing everything that is not generically masculine, *the alien* represents "a society without sexual division, gender as an individual choice, metamorphosis from one sex to another, gender as prosthesis" (Attebery 2002, 9). If we return to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, we will see that Le Guin's language is under the influence of essentialist gender markers. Genly Ai sees this world in binaries. Everything acquires a masculine or feminine characteristic in his eyes. Thus, the author does not utilise the tools of SF to escape or defeat patriarchal worldview, and sets the narration on a phallogocentric pinpoint. Stephenson cites that masculine descriptors like "handsome" or "very erect" are used for positive connotation; whereas feminine descriptors are often associated with weakness, be it emotional or physical (Stephenson 2016). The language, thus, gives the impression of reading not an androgynous society, but an all-male one whose habitants regularly/randomly acquire the female sex on a temporary basis. Le Guin (1989, 170–171) too admits this one-sided view on androgyny in her essay: "one does not see Estraven . . . in any role that we automatically perceive as 'female': and therefore, we tend to see him as a man." Genly is in constant conflict with himself about his feelings for Estraven. Interestingly, his conflicts do not arise because of Estraven's androgynous nature, but more because of his male-like portrayal.

Similarly, when drawing parallels between femininity and *the alien*, I should also mention *The Female Man* by Joanna Russ (1975). Russ constructs a novel with a complex narrative structure delivered by four protagonists, i.e. as Parslow (2010, 203) would put, a "hyper-individuated self" of a character, Joanna, and the various forms of her gendered consciousness. Janet is a woman coming from an all-woman society, while Jeannine is an oppressed woman from a slightly altered more dystopian reality of 1960's, and Jael is a "guerrilla" in a world where men and women are at war. Joanna, on the other hand lives in a realistic depiction of the 1960's. While Joanna epitomises the oppression, and Jael the aggression,

Janet is the everywoman of the story. She comes from Whileaway, a one-sexed utopia. Her reality is the self-actualisation of the *praxis,* the highest achievement. Patriarchy is an unknown term for her, as well as men, whom she considers a particularly foreign species (Russ 1975). The social structure of Whileaway is very different from Earth. Namely, everyone participates in the society; it is a classless, developed, improved society. When Janet explains their way of living, the other characters are in awe at the possibility of such a world. These kinds of anti-motifs of "societies without sexual division" or having "gender as an individual choice" is a most alien concept and usually the femininity is either absent, seen as a bad thing or completely undermined in the works.

5.3. THE CYBORG

Donna Haraway (1992, 150–151) writes in her essay *The Cyborg Manifesto*: "by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs … The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense…" If we refer to her theory, a cyborg "has no origin story in the Western sense", that is an origin story of "unity, fullness… the task of individual development and of history" (Haraway 1992, 150–151). Instead it is a being of a "post-gender world" which acquires its integrity by adapting "all the powers of the parts into a higher unity" (Haraway 1992, 150). This theory is very important when analysing *Patchwork Girl* by Shelley Jackson (1995). The monster, i.e. the patchwork girl, is a creation of various body parts. While we immediately accept it as a she, the author wittily constructs her out of, mainly female body parts, a male part, and even a limb of a cow. This shakes the subjectivity of the monster altogether. Additionally,

it challenges our ideas of the woman. One is immediately reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's famous proposition that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. Jackson (1995) takes this expression and mocks the notion of "becoming a woman", in fact what makes us accept the monster as a female is vague. I believe that it is tightly connected to Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. Namely, instead of accepting an identity attributed by the nature (gender essentialism), we should treat gender as performative (Butler 1990). The patchwork girl's identity is not given by the nature either. Instead, it is a collective subjectivity. After all, the monster does not have a traditional origin. It, as a metaphorical cyborg, exists to deconstruct the binary oppositions. Nevertheless, the patchwork girl simultaneously adjusts to being what Cixous (1976) has reserved for women – *the other* in her binary oppositions. Therefore, from a phallocentric point of view, the patchwork girl "would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (Haraway 1992, 151).

6. CONCLUSION

The genre has chronologically seen incredible development. Every new invention had a primary influence on SF and vice versa. SF, with its revolutionary nature, challenges the norm of femininity and offers an opportunity a scope to look at the notion from an angle never used before. Putting gender studies in a science fictional context opens new opportunities both for understanding how much social norms influence our imagination and creativity, and for breaking the barriers built by the same social norms. Envisioning the post-gender world of artificial intelligence demonstrates the insignificance of the heated discussions on binary opposition hardcoded in the human consciousness. Thinking about alien species that do not fit in our world picture enhances our level of tolerance. Science fiction proves that we can change the future through language and literature, and it is praiseworthy.

NOTES

[1] Nowadays, the boundaries between the masculine and feminine are flickering in the hands of post- structural deconstruction; but for the sake of apprehending the historical misconceptions, I will not disregard the Western idea of binary oppositions.

[2] From now on I will use *SF* as the abbreviation for *science fiction.* While *sci-fi* is a more conventional abbreviation, due to its usage as a derogatory term in the past, like many science fiction authors, I prefer to use SF.

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