



**Voices of the Voiceless: A Study of Science Fiction, Women and  
Feminism**



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**Research Paper :**

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, psychically open. No doors shut. What science, from physics and astronomy to history and psychology, has given us is the open universe: a cosmos that is not a simple, fixed hierarchy, but an immensely complex process in time. 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. It is not a comfortable, reassuring place. It's a very large house, a very drafty house. But it's the house we live in.

– Ursula K. Le Guin

Science fiction, a distinguished genre, remains transnational uniting the entire world for positive growth and progress any time and any part of the world. If the aim of science is to promote human welfare, then science fiction, by exploiting the contours of imagination, remains a substantial mode to the value of this cause. Science fiction explores the world of science pursued and rendered with the faculty of imagination. The developed nation of the First World has made material progress with the help of scientific exploration. The Third World countries like India need to do explorations of science for the betterment of humanity. Science fiction forges a path for the progress of the third world societies in general and the progress of minority groups, women, subalterns, the oppressed and the downtrodden in particular. Peculiarly a twentieth century genre, science fiction has tried to make sense of the rapidity of technological change and the impact which science and technology have made on our society. By imagining other worlds and possible future, the genre allows to view our present day situation with greater detachment and perspective. The writers of science fiction are conscious of the interaction between science and society, and it is a useful tool for enlightenment of society. Issues such as stem cell research, cloning in Biology, researches into nuclear devices, and the spying capability of remote sensing satellites have raised moral-social questions. One sees today how the possibility of knowing the sex of the unborn child can raise horrendous issues. By speculating future scenarios, a good science fiction can alert us to the possible dangers to human society. What the thinkers, scholars, writers and critics meant by science fiction, by and large, can be summed up as follows: Science fiction (abbreviated SF or sci-fi with varying punctuation and capitalization) is a distinguished literary genre; rather it is essentially a literary form and not a branch of science. It is a form of fiction that deals primarily with the effects of actual or imagined scientific progress on living and non-living entities. It is a broad genre of fiction that often involves speculations, extrapolations and thought-experiment on current or future science or technology. It is a literary form in which advanced technology and/or science is a key element. In science fiction the technology which, while theoretically possible is not yet practical. It is a form of fiction that draws imaginatively on scientific knowledge and/or speculation. It depicts either a utopian or a dystopian picture of the

past or the future world that too with a present concern. It is a form of writing in which a writer explores unexpected possibilities of the past or the future by using scientific data and theories. It includes stories, novellas, novels, even exercises in poetry and dramas that have a scientific core or fictional accounts of events based on that core. It is a type of narrative about or based upon real or imagined scientific theories and technology. Science fiction is often peopled with alien creatures. It includes the hardcore, imaginatively embellished technological/scientific novels as well as fictions that are even slightly futuristic often with an after-the-holocaust milieu-nuclear, environmental, extraterrestrial, genocide contexts. These kinds of fictions deal with the influence of real or imagined science on society or individuals. Novels of this kind pre-suppose a technology or an effect of technology or a disturbance in natural order, which up to the time of writing is not in actual fact been experienced. It is a literary genre that is concerned with the impact of scientific and technological breakthroughs upon human beings and it depicts future sceneries of science and technology developments without contradicting the present understanding of science and technology. SF deals with the possible. Hard SF deals with hardware while soft SF deals with wetware. In hard SF science is not merely necessary, but central and compulsory whereas in soft SF science is referential, fictional and sometimes marginal. The best science fiction, however, deals with both aspects, applying the science to human behavior and systems. The success of science fiction depends on its ability to appear plausible.

The notable science fiction writer and critic Ursula K. Le Guin shares with most other science fiction writers the belief that this type of writing has a unique place in modern literature. Often quoted is Le Guin's analogy of science and science fiction as an open house:

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, psychically open. No doors shut. What science, from physics and astronomy to history and psychology, has given us is the open universe: a cosmos that is not a simple, fixed hierarchy, but an immensely complex process in time. 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. It is not a comfortable, reassuring place. It's a very large house, a very drafty house. But it's the house we live in (Wood 1979: 206).

Betty King (1984: v-vi) shares Le Guin while stating the importance of the genre of science

fiction as follows:

Science fiction is a door into a world in which men and women can be written about as a whole beings, each with needs, each with shortcomings, each with strengths... science fiction, as it is today can help us piece together a composite of attractive characteristics in the creation of our own “most wonderful person in the world”...ourselves.

### **Feminist Approach:**

Feminism is an interdisciplinary philosophy focusing on gender. It is a protest against the grain philosophy. It focuses on man–woman relationship. It is a critique on Patriarchy and Grain Philosophy. It challenges all kinds of politics / ideologies. It is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary theory – feminism’s goal is to change this degrading view of women so that all women will realize that they are not a “non-significant other”, but that instead each women is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man. Women feminist declare, must define themselves and assert their own voices in the arenas of politics society, education, and the arts. By personally committing themselves to fostering such change feminist hope to create a society in which the female voice is valued equally with the male.

In criticism it follows gynocriticism / gynology and attempts for the deconstruction / Reconstruction of the followings: 1) Biology – Sex and gender 2) Experience – dismisses traditionalism 3) Psychoanalysis / Unconscious – critique on Freudianism - follows Lacanian psychoanalysis 4) Socio-economic conditions

Its purpose is the investigations of four areas. 1) Images of female body 2) Female language 3) The female psyche 4) Culture.

Feminism makes the following assumptions while interpreting the literary text. It asks basic questions:

1) Is the author male or female? 2) Is the text narrated by a male or a female? 3) What types of roles do women have in the text? 4) Are the female characters the protagonists or secondary and minor characters? 5) Do any stereotypical characterizations of women appear? 6) What are the attitudes towards women held by the male characters? 7) What is the author’s attitude towards women in society? 8) How does the author’s culture influence her or his attitude? 9) If feminine imagery used? 10) If so, what is the significance of such imagery 11) Do the female characters speak differently from the male characters & Aim – equality between male and female at all levels of life.... Characterized by applied philosophy – for this reason feminist critical theory is a

microcosm of the entire theoretical universe, in which a power struggle continues unabated. It is a revisionist, revolutionary, and ideological philosophy.

Major phases of Feminist literary theory are as follows:

- 1) A Feminine Phase (1840-1880) in which women writers imitated the male writers in their norms and artistic standards. Ex. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Elizabeth Gaskell, Jane Austin. It is equal to Alice Walker's "Suspended phase".
- 2) A Feminist Phase (1880-1920) – in which a different and often a separate position was maintained. During which women advocated minority rights and protested. Ex. Elizabeth Robins, Olive Schreiner. It is equal to A. W's Assimilated phase.
- 3) A Female Phase (1920-onwards) during which depending on opposition that is on uncovering misogyny in male texts – is being replaced by a rediscovery of women's text and women. It has a distinct female identity, style and content. It is equal to A. W's "Emergent Phase". It is the phase of "Gynocriticism" – Women are writing self-discovery. Ex. – Rebecca West, Katharine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson – Pilgrimage.

Though there are different shades of Feminism one can broadly say that feminism has developed along the following lines: 1) Radical Feminism – which rejects the symbolic order and which is more militant in its approach. 2) Liberal Feminism – which demands equal access to the symbolic order. 3) Rational Feminism – that challenges the notion of male/ female identity of masculinity / femininity as metaphysical constructed and connoted. It pleads for humanity, equality and mutual understanding between men and women at all levels of life. By and large feminism challenges traditional notions of womanhood and redefines women's experiences from women's point of view.

### **Science fiction, women and Feminism:**

Science fiction traditionally has been considered in Lacanian terms a male centered literature meant for phallogocentric values: men wrote it and boys read it. The truth behind this tradition can be verified over most of the history of SF by inspecting any table of contents or readership survey. Actually women have been a part of SF since its beginning, but their role until recent times was relatively minor, barring a few exceptions. In the literary history of science fiction, women writers are deliberately neglected. In fact SF history is full of politics and power and a matter of choice. Louise Berinkow (1974:3) very aptly unveils the politics in literary history:

Literary history is a matter of power, not justice...what is commonly called literary

history is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their time and which have not depends upon who noticed them and chose to record the notice. Which works have become part of the canon of literature, read, thought about, discussed, and which have disappeared depends, in the same way, on the process of selection and power to select.

Like Derridian Deconstruction, the writers of science fiction do not want an arbitrary subversion of the phallogocentric tradition of science fiction but an establishment of harmonious mature culture based upon equality and humane perspective. For that they are using the genre of science fiction. Bainbridge William Sims (1986: 196) rightly presents this humane perspective:

With such themes and insights science fiction by women informs our consciousness of vital current issues of science, technology and sex roles. It may contribute to our evolution toward a happier and more comprehensive culture.

Irrespective of the various obstacles and due to the freedom given by the flexibility of SF genre, women writers become successful in bringing women characters from margin to center, from ignorance to knowledge, from veil to vision. Jane Donawerth rightly states deconstruction of SF 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 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 center, and by resisting the male narrator with multiple narrations or by using him to reform the males of their audiences (Davidson & Wagner 1995: 781).

Viewed the tradition of science fiction from the women's point of view one understands that in spite of the rich contribution of women writers this kind of the genre of SF still suffers the malady of phallogocentric subsumption. This kind of phallogocentric perspective created an inequality between male and female in both life and literature. Bill Warren rightly comments: "All these novels raise questions about the role of women and emphasize the fact that, in both SF and the real world, women and men are still far from true equality" (Gunn 1988:514).

With a critical scanning of the history of the genre of science fiction it becomes clear that women writers and women characters in SF before the 1900s were minor ones, "a compulsory

appendage” as the Swedish writer Sam J. Lundwall calls them in his book *Science Fiction: What It's All About* (1969/1971). Women were typically portrayed as helpless, weak, easily frightened, and angelic; or, in contrast, they were witch-like, mothering or child-like, indecisive or sly and manipulative, coy, and never, never had sexual attractions or desires of their own. Women were portrayed as lacking in that adventuresome spirit or professionalism that was needed in a SF hero. Lundwall (1971:37) once more hits home when he writes, “The classic function of the woman, as depicted in gaudy colors on the covers or the pulp magazines, was to follow the hero as a kind of reverentially listening Dr. Watson.” Most were incidental to the story, there to be saved, damned, or married as a reward or punishment, or as a contrast to the fearless adventurous male hero. In science fiction the relationship between men and women were based on the basis of gender discrimination. Lundwall (*Ibid.*) comments on the position of women in SF:

Science fiction is on the whole a very progressive literature when it comes to freedom and equality, but there are things in the field that can make even the most narrow-minded prelate look like a veritable light-bearer. Foremost among these dark spots stands woman...In a world where women at last are beginning to be recognized as human beings, science fiction still clings to the views of the last century. If a daring member of one of the current women's liberation movements stepped out into the men's world of the future, she'd probably be shot on sight.

But gradually SF has taken enormous strides not only in updating its female characters, but also in projecting future female heroes. This constrictive change and development occurs in SF with the increase of female SF writers over the years.

Before 1900, almost all SF writers, except for Mary Shelley and other few, were male and wrote exclusively from a male viewpoint as if they were the sole controllers of the universe. It wasn't until the twentieth century that an increasing number of women began to get their SF published. Even then, many used male pseudonyms and wrote from a male point of view. Andre Norton (Alice Mary Norton, now legally Andre Alice Norton) and James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon) are two of the more widely known female SF writers who use male pen names. Some used initials, like C (atherine) L (ucille) Moore. However they managed to become published. Betty King (1984:1) rightly describes the condition of a SF book with a woman character:

Generally speaking, if a SF book was widely read, it had either no women characters or women in only minor or, at best, secondary character roles. If a SF book had a woman

main character, it was not widely read or, at least, did not remain popular into our own time.

Women were more or less forced to write from a male point of view but they also wrote from women's point of view and for women. Jane Donawerth rightly states the change in women's SF writing:

Early women shared with male writers a romantic vision of science, perhaps because of the influence of the newly available college education in science for women. But unlike men, these women either extend women's sphere of influence to include women's control of government (as in Minna Irving's 1929 "The Moonwoman" in *Amazing Stories*, or Lilith Lorraine's 1930 "Into the 28<sup>th</sup> Century" in *Science Wonder Quarterly*) or advocate equal rights for women (as in Leslie Stone's 1929 *When the Sun Went Out*, or Louise Rice and Tonjoroff-Roberts's 1930 "The Astounding Enemy" in *Amazing Stories Quarterly*) (Davidson & Wagner-Martin 1995:781).

SF is still predominately written by male writers for phellorcentric values and about male heroes. However, an ever-increasing number of female writers and main characters may soon turn that tide. In addition, male writers of SF are writing about women characters more than ever before and many take pride in their portrayal of their female characters. Along with a gradual increase in the number of female heroes has come a new sexual openness and exploration in SF. More and more female heroes are appearing, and many are sexually active. The greater numbers of female writers being published are fearlessly providing readers with heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual female protagonists, presented in a non-pornographic, non-exploitive fashion and with dignity. Many writers are more fully exploring the possibilities of the female human experience through the realm of the SF genre. SF has always been the ideal genre for this exploration because of the experimental and speculative nature of its approach, but this exploration has, in the past, been directed primarily towards space, other life forms, telepathy, and other dimensions rather than the exploration of the human potential. In her article "What Can A Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write" Joanna Russ states that SF is one of the very few genres in which women characters can be portrayed as whole people, free of myths surrounding gender roles. Of fiction as a whole, Russ (1995:83) writes, "what myths, what plots, what actions are available to a female protagonist? Very few." Of SF, Russ (*Ibid*: 91) writes:

The myths of science fiction run along the lines of exploring a new world conceptually



(not necessarily physically), creating needed physical or social machinery, assessing the consequences of technological or other changes, and so on. These are not stories about men *que* Man and women *qua* Woman; they are myths of human, intelligence and human adaptability.

SF is the ideal genre for women to explore new self-concepts, to expand their view in literature of women as “human” first and “female” second, to create much-needed composite models of whole women with characteristics that they can admire and emulate. Betty King (1984: xv) very aptly states the positive development and constructive change in women characters in the genre of SF as follows:

Women characters in SF are now often given the opportunity to exist outside the orb of a man’s existence and frequently are recognized as having the right to exist for their own sakes, thinking and functioning independently, having adventures and responsibilities, making decisions that not only affect themselves, but change the world.

Science fiction reflected in male tradition explores and exploits science as a mode of power domination, destruction, and violence. Women, on the contrary, perceive the scientific truth as the means of reconstructing human society in positive terms regarding constructive change, growth and all-round sound development unto this last. The space of dominance and violence of men science fiction is replaced by women science fiction writers with space for harmony, co-ordination, and humaneness. They have been using SF as a tool for reformation. Jane Donawerth rightly states.

Influenced by the feminist birth control campaigns of the 1920s, many women writers used science to eliminate childbirth. Women writers also revised housekeeping through technology, paralleling the scientific homemaker promoted in the women’s magazines from this time (Davidson & Wagner-Martin 1995: 781).

### **A few landmarks in the tradition of feminist SF:**

Mary Shelley’s pioneering efforts marking the beginning of the genre of science fiction through her *avantgarding* book, *Frankenstein*, created an awareness of current technology and scientific theory and extrapolating it to create a fresh perspective in the form of thought experiment. Based

on a research on origin of species *Frankenstein*, drawing upon scientific and technological advances, suggests the future consequences of thoughtless scientific experiments. It is grounded on the specific research, namely, that of creating life in the laboratory without a mother's womb. It predicts the modern researches on cloning, and it criticizes the way some scientists have been trying to control nature. It is a revelation of what is in the store for humanity if science and technology is immorally or irresponsibly used. It is a pioneering and powerful treatise on the responsibilities and values of science. It's thought experiment is that a thoughtless research in science leads towards diabolic effects.

Le Guin in her 'thought-experimented' SF texts has constructed a rainbow of planetary relationships through the principle of 'integration and integrity'. In *Left Hand of Darkness* the thesis is that war is caused by masculine aggression and if two individual aliens can establish a community then there is hope for relationships between the two planets. In *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) Le Guin presents a thought-experiment that assimilation of minorities into mainstream on the basis of colonialism is not possible. It presents an antithesis that humankind would ever find the language, ethics, and technology to lessen alienation and finds the "modality of integration and integrity." *The Dispossessed* presents a synthesis that a dispossessed with the aid of science achieves "integration and integration" in his/her personal, professional, and social life by breaking down walls. The Hainish novels focus on the significance of diplomacy, the struggle to balance conflicting needs of the human community and of the individual. They deal with the opposition between freedom and social restriction, between fidelity and betrayal, and between alienation and integration. In her novel there is the voyage of discovery that leads to knowledge of the other, and to knowledge of the self. The integrity of individual people, societies, and worlds can be achieved when the uniqueness and difference of each separate thing is honored. The integration of these diversities is achieved when the interactions and interdependency among them is respected. Le Guin opposes a forward-looking, ambitious and progressive culture against a quieter, present-centered, and slow-changing culture.

Butler's SF presents racial and sexual awareness. In *Kindred* she exploits laws of physics in order to fictionalize the archetypal struggle of a black woman with ignorance, injustice and inhumanity. The imprint of slavery is carried in both, minds and bodies of all African-Americans, as symbolized in the novel by Dana's loss of an arm during her ordeal. *Xenogenesis* series is about the intricate web of power and affection in the relationships between human

beings and alien species. Women are used as mere commodities in scientific experiment. Genderless society can be constructed by eradicating sexism, racism, phallocentrism and other discrimination among human beings. Butler's thesis is that the conflict between the gift of intelligence and the inborn tendency toward hierarchical behavior is the root of human problems. Women writers have transcended the shorelines of SF. The world of SF presented by women writers is a world of millennial vision based on harmonious interdependent interrelationships. Science and scientific discoveries should be designed not only for national development but for the progress of the minority groups, women, subalterns, the oppressed and the downtrodden in particular.

### **Indian Scenario:**

Indian science fiction also has been evolving through the same stages like the science fiction in the west. In India this literary form first made its appearance in various languages. Around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Bengali, Jagdish Chandra Bose has written the first science fiction story, *Taming of Storm* (1897). In Marathi *Tarache Hasya* by S.B. Ranade and *Srinivasrao* by Nath Madhav appeared simultaneously. Among the few eminent Indian SF writers are Salman Rushdie (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet*), Jayant Naraliker, Bal Phondke, Subodh Jawdekar, Niranjana Ghate, Laxman Londhe, Arun Mande, Anish Deb, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyaya, Niranjana Sinha, Rajshekhar Bhusnurmath, Sanjay Hawnur, Devvarta Das, Mukul Sharma, R.N. Sharma, Keneth Doyel, Devendra Mevari, Arvind Mishra, Ruchir Joshi (*The Last Jet Engine Laugh*), Ashok Bankar, Upendra Mehan, Dilip Salwe (*Fire on Moon*) Samit Basu (*The Simoqin Prophecies*) Amitav Ghosh (*The Calcutta Chromosome*), Subhash Jaireth (*Remembering Dehlie: A chrono-topo-graphy of Imagination*), HariKunzru. Deepaka Chopra's *Return of Merlin* (1995), Anil Aggrawal's Nine SF Books on Forensics, Bimal K. Srivastava's writing on Aviation, Kumar Arunachalam's works on Ornithology etc is also worth considerable. In India, a few women writers also gave their substantial contribution to science fiction. Writers like Subhada Gogte, 'Sujata,' Vandanasingh (*Young Uncle comes to Town*) Sunita Nam Joshi (*The Mothers of Maya Dip*), Majula Padbhanabhan (*Escape*, 2008; *Kleptomana: Ten Stories*, 2004) and others are writing in English. Nandini Pandya in US has drawn inspiration from a Marathi magazine called *Vichitra Vishwa* and has now constructed an online magazine namely *desijournal.com* Mr. M.H. Shrinarahari (2006:15) has noticed that:

Major Indian sf. writers resemble A.E. Van Vogt in missionary zeal, an Isaac Asimov

in popularizing SF, a Carl Sagan in authenticity, an Arthur C. Clarke in localizing the situation and use science in lucid language to reach the common men.

By and large the point made in the paper is that the theoretical and ideological discourses of feminism aiming equality between male and female at all levels and the genre of science fiction practiced by a few women writers fictionalizing a humane conscience use of science created not only the grounds of mutual exclusivism, but of creative complementarity in both life and literature as well.

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