

Infertility in Science Fiction as a Feminist Issue

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Introduction: Feminism and Fertility

ALTHOUGH MYTHOLOGICAL FIGURES such as the Amazonian female warrior might encourage us to think that feminism is as old as mythology,¹ feminism as a political stance through which the personal came to be perceived as political and which highlighted patriarchal structures and ideology as systematically making the female of the human species seem inferior to the male, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Despite some important 19th century works, we can claim that feminism as a political and critical movement came into its own after WWII.

Literary feminism brings together a range of approaches to textual analysis. These include the critique of patriarchal language and tropes, addressing the historical disappearance of women writers, the authorial voice of women, and the increasing presence of women in the canon and in genres formally dominated by male writers. Some of these approaches, such as Marxist Feminism, have privileged the realist novel as a locus of analysis and have delved into the relationship between literature and life, perceiving representation of women, attitudes towards women, and the language of the text as reflective of socially constructed gender-biased attitudes between the sexes at various historical moments.²

The sub-genre of feminist science fiction with an emphasis on fertility explores the roles of women and men by examining social constructions and the enforcement of gender roles with particular refer-

ence to the inequalities of personal and political power that are dictated by one's gender. Feminist SF often delves into these themes by contrasting two opposed approaches: utopias and dystopias. The former tends towards narrative worlds in which gender differences are nonexistent, as in single-sex worlds, whereas dystopias tend towards the extrapolation of patriarchal structures taken to extremes. Since SF is a genre closely connected to realist social concerns, its critical and innovative centre is more likely to be found in its themes and content rather than in its formal structures, which tend to follow fairly conventional narratological patterns.

Feminism and fertility are inextricably intertwined. Varying viewpoints on the relationship between the political and the physical can be plotted in a typology of different feminisms with an eye to fertility and related issues. Broad feminist categories can be outlined along the following axis:

Liberal feminism identifies its roots with Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, seeking equality of the two sexes due to the fear that the different treatment of women that may lead to the stereotyping of roles and to marginalization, typically through marriage. Pregnancy is viewed as a disability, while new reproductive technologies are welcomed as augmenting female choice. Men are therefore involved as in statements such as 'we are pregnant' but this, on the other hand, implies male appropriation of the female body.

Matriarchal/matrifocal feminism revels in the ways in which women differ from men and therefore celebrates pregnancy as an identity-conferring condition. Infertility treatments are viewed with suspicion as they are seen as patriarchal techniques that medicalize and dominate the body.³ Interestingly, Peggy Robin (1993) points out that 85% of women seeking infertility treatment were attended by male physicians.⁴

Postmodern feminists are arguably the least concerned with these issues. By regarding 'femaleness' as a socially constructed category, they study the ways in which class, race, and other factors, such as gender, construct the female 'body'. **French Femi-**

1 Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology*. London: Routledge, 2004. p. 263.

2 On this point, and on the broader relationship between literature and feminism, see Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993., and also Mary Eagleton *Feminist Literary Criticism*. Harlow: Longman, 1996., for a range of debates on literature, literary criticism and feminism in the 20th century. The relationship between science fiction and women's lives is also discussed in Sarah Lefanu's Introduction to Joanna Russ, *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1995. Feminism, fertility and SF are discussed in an essay by Joanna Russ, 'Amor Vincit Foeminam: The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction', in *To Write Like a Woman*, pp. 41–59.

3 Gena Corea, *The Mother Machine: Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985.

4 Peggy Robin, *How to Be a Successful Fertility Patient: Your Guide to Getting the Best Possible Medical Help to Have a Baby*. Scranton: Harper Collins, 1993.

nism is also less concerned with the body and more focussed on issues of style and voice in writing, indicating that a feminine style does not necessarily indicate a female writer.

Foucauldian feminists view the most dangerous forms of control as those that are ubiquitous and so pervasive that they are assumed and deeply internalized such that these strictures appear disconnected from any form of overt displays of power, and indeed, may even disguise themselves as forms of liberation and choice. This may include relatively innocuous and ostensibly helpful state surrogates, such as home health visitors after delivery, as the state has a stake in the health of both mother and child, with confinement here having a double meaning.

Feminism and SF

The 1970s was the decade in which feminism in science fiction flourished. This is the genre that, arguably, produced some of the most interesting examples of feminist fiction. Carl Freedman's review of Marleen S. Barr's *Future Females: The Next Generation* (2000) brings into steady focus the fact that the intertwining of feminism and science fiction was flourishing long before the literary institutions and feminist critics paid it any attention. The popular, rather than academic, status long attributed to SF meant that works which today are considered central to the symbiosis of feminism and SF were ignored for at least a decade after their publication.

In an ironic development, it was the women writers of SF who were instrumental in bringing SF to academic critical recognition. As these new writers of SF brought mainstream themes of race, gender and class, elaborated through the canonical fictional devices of utopias and dystopias through a feminist point of view to the genre their works began to impinge on critical notice. The genre, which was previously associated mainly with interplanetary warfare, medieval looking worlds with anachronistic weapons set in future time/space scenarios and which seemed to have little relevance to the present conditions of humanity and of writing, was suddenly involved with the same themes that more 'literary' texts were developing.

In addition, as writers who had already received critical attention through non-SF novels, such as Ursula K. Le Guin, known for her work in fantasy, and Margaret Atwood, well-known for award winning

novels which were fully based in the 'real' world, began to write SF, the attention of the academy was engaged. These 'cross-over' writers were instrumental in drawing the critical gaze to the genre of science fiction.

Utopian and Dystopian Narratives

Two of the most notable novels detailing feminist utopias are Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) 'which, through a radical imagining of human life without gender, explores gender as a cultural construction that is at once coercive and contingent',⁵ and Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) 'which focuses on the struggle to establish lesbian and feminist identities and sexualities within the constraints of a culture of compulsory heterosexuality'.⁶ Both are novels of the golden age of 70s feminist SF. In *The Female Man*, 'characters refuse the reader's search for innocent wholeness while granting the wish for heroic quests, exuberant eroticism, and serious politics'. The book deals with four women who hail from different worlds: Jeannine whose world revolves around marriage, Joanna who is experiencing a feminist revolution but is still expected to orient herself around men, Janet who lives in a women-only world as men have been killed off centuries before by a plague, and Jael, an assassin who lives in a world where the two sexes wage a cold war. These individuals are 'four versions of one genotype, all of whom meet, but even taken together do not make a whole, resolve the dilemmas of violent moral action, or remove the growing scandal of gender'.⁷

Feminist dystopias create societies wherein gender inequities are actually exaggerated and intensified, and perhaps Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) quintessentially embodies the ultimate of such possible dystopias. Inevitably, feminist dystopian fiction has also described a turning of the tables as in the 1905 short story, *The Sultana's Dream*, by Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain which portrays an alternate, crime-free world where men exist in a state of gender-reversed purdah.

Vonda McIntyre visualises fertility as a feminist contraceptive issue, and in *Dreamsnake* (1978) and

5 Wendy Gay Pearson and others eds., *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010. p. 5.

6 Wendy Gay Pearson, p. 5.

7 Donna J. Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Books, 1991. p. 178.

Superluminal (1984), she visualises both male and female fertility as a voluntary individual decision through a form of auto-control. The latter helps 're-define the pleasures and politics of embodiment and feminist writing. In a fiction where no character is 'simply' human, human status is highly problematic', as humanity is transformed by 'bionic implants, [...] virus vectors carrying a new developmental code, by transplant surgery, by implants of microelectronic devices, by analogue doubles, and other means.'⁸

In Frank Herbert's magnum opus *Dune* (1965), female fertility control is taken even further through the semi-religious, hereditary, female-only group known as the 'Bene Gesserit' who can also determine the gender of their offspring. They also play a byzantine game of politics through a breeding program spanning a millennium in order to produce a hyper-evolved but male mental adept. *Dune* also portrays a member of the nobility who is an offshoot of this breeding program and who is described as being a genetic eunuch, presumably implying a male who is born sterile. It is worth mentioning at this point that the long-term breeding of various species, both humans on Earth and aliens on other planets, is also the main theme behind what is probably the most famous space opera of all time, Smith's *Lensman* series. In true Stapledonian fashion, the story begins two thousand million years prior to contemporary events, when a benevolent alien race commences the breeding of several intelligent species in order to hand over the guardianship of the very universe in the face of an implacable and evil alien invasion of the universe.⁹ An unresolved plot element in the last book of the series concerns the ultimate development of this breeding program, five children, four of whom are women, who cannot possibly find anyone interesting enough to mate with, potentially resulting in their infertility.¹⁰

Yet another aspect of extreme physiological control of pregnancy is depicted in Iain M. Bank's *Excession* (1996), set in the *Culture* universe, where a human female carries a deliberately arrested gestation for years. Interestingly, female sexuality has also been utilised as a form of projectile weapon in Barker's SF-fantasy pastiche *Weaveworld* (1987).

Barker describes an ancient humanity that could access magic, but as science asserted its dominance, these individuals retreated to secret hideaways. A female renegade uses her magical powers, including the 'menstruum', to attempt to rule the seerkind or destroy them.¹¹ In a more practical vein, in Bujold's *Vorkosigan* universe, women who have had a contraceptive implant wear a distinguishing earring to state that they are consenting and contraceptive-protected adults.

Totalitarian Ideology and Fertility

The political vision of dystopian literature is often linked to totalitarian regimes in which the individual becomes a pawn of the state or of a ruling elite, and demographics an issue to be decided and determined by the state rather than the individual. Margaret Atwood highlights the politics of female fertility in the fictional world of *The Handmaid's Tale* by typically linking real world events to the fictionalized future scenario. In her 2011 publication *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, she explains:

My rules for *The Handmaid's Tale* were simple: I would not put into this book anything that humankind had not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not already have the tools. (2001: 88)

One of the reasons that feminism has flourished in SF, as previously mentioned, is the possibility of imagining worlds in which gender constructed differences cease to exist, sometimes, as in the case of single gendered imaginary worlds, because there is only one type of human. Fictional utopias provide the freedom within which to construct, to use Le Guin's term, 'thought experiments' that can play with combinations or absences that would blend or remove all gender imbalance and unfairness as perceived by contemporary women and men readers. Dystopias, on the other hand, provide the impetus to project possible outcomes that can be more harmful and more restrictive for women in different scenarios. Politically, these scenarios tend to be totalitarian regimes of different kinds, including the conservative Puritan theocracy imagined as the future for the US

⁸ Donna J. Haraway, p. 180.

⁹ E.E. Smith, 'Triplanetary', *Amazing Stories*, January–April 1934.

¹⁰ E.E. Smith, 'Children of the Lens', *Astounding Science Fiction*, November 1947–February 1948.

¹¹ *Menstruum* is actually Latin for a solvent, specifically one used in extracting compounds from plant and animal tissues for the preparation of drugs. Clive Barker, *Weaveworld*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

as conceived by Atwood. Such a society might revoke the liberation from gender expectations which contemporary women have begun to take for granted. Atwood asks:

How thin is the ice on which supposedly “liberated” modern Western women stand? How far can they go? How much trouble are they in? What’s down there is they fall?

And further: If you were attempting a totalitarian takeover of the United States, how would you do it? What form would such a government assume, and what flag would it fly? How much social instability would it take before people would renounce their hard-won civil liberties in a tradeoff for “safety”? And, since most totalitarianisms we know have attempted to control reproduction one way or another – limiting births, demanding births, specifying who can marry who and who owns the kids – how would that motif play off for women? (2001: 87)

Both utopian and dystopian fiction, particularly in the case of SF, provide the author with a construct through which to critique the present, while proposing a possible prediction of a future. Just as one of the essential generic features of ‘hard’ SF is that the science in the worlds is ‘real’ science, known in the present and extrapolated into the future as in the case of teleporting humans, portals, space travel, and so on, then one of the generic features of utopian/dystopian fiction is the similar device of taking a trend in the present and ‘arriving via logic at a prophetic truth.’¹² The truth arrived at in a manner typical of the novelist, whose ‘business,’ Le Guin reminds us, ‘is lying.’ Precisely the definition of the poetic that Aristotle provided in the earliest discussion of genre, the *Poetics*, in which he separated the writing of history from the writing of poetry precisely on the point that poetry can provide us with the greater truth of the possible ways things can happen, whereas history only speaks of the particulars of what has been. ‘Poetry,’ he says, ‘is a more philosophical and serious business than history; for poetry speaks of universals, history of particulars.’¹³

Atwood was called to defend her tale of forced fertility based on biblical ritual as a school text book. She wrote a letter to schools in which she explained,

The sexual point in my book would seem to be that all totalitarianisms try to control sex and reproduction one way or another. Many have forbidden inter-racial and inter-class unions. Some have tried to limit childbirth, other have tried to enforce it. It was a common practice for slave owners to rape their slaves, for the simple purpose of making more slaves. And so on. (2001: 244)

In Atwood we seem to have a combination of history and fiction, which gives rise to a chillingly possible future for the West, and in some other parts of the world a reality in the present, in which women’s control over their bodies and their fertility is denied them in the name of patriarchal structures and religious norms.

Cyborgs and Feminist SF

Female sexual fulfilment is also explored in feminist narratives such as Piercy’s *He, She, and It* (1991), where an android, a re-creation of the equivalent of a Golem by two Jewish scientists, becomes a being who ‘transgresses not only the conventional boundary between human and machine, but between male and female as well.’ His programming is such that he ‘derives his pleasure primarily from pleasing his partner,’ a being whose ‘marvellous organ is scrupulously clean.’ His ‘entire body is free of the kind of physical imperfections that characterize human men.’ However, this android ‘differs substantially from Haraway’s notion that the problematic gender of the cyborg is considerably more “dangerous” than that of the sensitive male, whose very androgyny may in fact involve an attempt subtly to appropriate power,’ and also imbricates the trope of the sanitation of sex, a common element in cyberpunk with its technological appropriation and misappropriation, ‘a phenomenon embodied, for example, in the distaste for ‘meat things’ shown by many of Gibson’s male characters.’¹⁴

The converse is Asimov’s *Satisfaction Guaranteed* (1951), a short robot story which depicts an experi-

12 Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. London: Virago, 2001, p. 122.

13 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Gerald F. Else. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1967. 1994, p.33.

14 M. Keith Booker, ‘Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 21 (1994), 337–350 (p. 347–348).

mental humaniform household robot that is fashioned in a very handsome male form. The robot is placed with a woman whose husband works for the robot's manufacturing company. The robot comes to the realisation that she has low self-esteem and attempts to redress this by redecorating his mistress' house and by giving her a make-over through the use of cosmetics and other artifices. At the end of the story, he deliberately allows her neighbours to see him, a strange and handsome male, him kiss her, thereby elevating her social status.

In both of the above stories, sex of any kind with any sort of robot, will naturally not result in pregnancy.

Women-Only Worlds

Women-only worlds abound, and may be viewed as extreme feminist utopias. Only three famous narratives will be highlighted as examples of this subtrope.

Tiptree's most famous award winning and reprinted story is *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* (1976), and this depicts a plague that wipes out most human life, with only 11,000 survivors, all female, who continued the species by repeatedly cloning these original 11,000 genotypes. A group of males who return to Earth from space are killed so as to avoid disturbing the harmonious paradise that Earth has become in the absence of the male of the species.

Similarly, Russ's *When It Changed* (1972) depicts the return of males to the women-only world of *Whileaway*. This society is stable and peaceful and women see the return of the men as a return to tyranny and oppression of the past, and yet, men assume that they will be eventually made welcome, even if their return is forcefully imposed.

One of the more recent, women-only worlds has been described by Doris Lessing, and in *The Cleft* (2007), an ancient community of women have no knowledge of men, and childbirth is regulated by the cycles of the moon. This feminist *utopia* is disrupted by the birth of boys.

Discussion

As we have shown above, the single-gendered trope is often used to explore utopian (usually feminist) scenarios or dystopias. Power is enmeshed in all of these discourses, whether feminist or otherwise, as argued by Foucault: '(i) that power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network; (ii) that

relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality)'.¹⁵ This is particularly so in sexual relations wherein interpersonal relationships achieve greatest intricacy and intensity, and are hence particularly susceptible to the mechanisms of power

Fertility and reproduction play key roles in defining gender, and the control of one's fertility is a central theme in feminist manifestos, as pregnancy and childrearing are often used to subordinate women, although Foucault has argued that such 'power is not evil. Power is games of strategy [...] let us take sexual or amorous relationships: to wield power over the other in a sort of open-ended strategic game where the situation may be reversed is not evil; it's a part of love, of passion and sexual pleasure.'¹⁶ This notion of productive power gives rise to the subjects over whom, and through whom, power structures enmesh us all – both in fictional and in actual worlds.

It has been remarked that some feminist critics have exaggerated the role of feminism in SF, thereby excessively slandering the male of the species. For example, Anne K. Mellor has portrayed Frankenstein as the archetypal:

[s]cientist who analyzes, manipulates, and attempts to control nature unconsciously engages in a form of oppressive sexual politics. Construing nature as the female Other, he attempts to make nature serve his own ends, to gratify his own desires for power, wealth, and reputation. (1989: 112)

This positioning superficially ignores the existence of female scientists who have objectives, desires, goals and ambitions identical to male scientists.

It is more reasonable to state that SF allows us to perform thought experiments that create altogether different utopias, as conventional utopias are often similar to Moore's *Utopia*, 'where equality is emphasized above all else, even to the point of suppression of individual liberty and imposition of a potentially oppressive conformity, [...], and despite his imagination, Moore's *Utopia* is still a strongly patriarchal

15 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge – Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. by Colin Gordon and others. New York: Pantheon, 1980. p. 142.

16 Michel Foucault, *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 1*, ed. by Paul Rabinow. New York: The New Press, 1994. p. 298.

society.’¹⁷

In these ways, SF forces us into a deliberate consideration of where our actions, through a diversity of choices, might lead us, and perhaps guide us toward decisions that yield the greatest good for the many without pitting one gender against the other.

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¹⁷ Booker, pp. 337–338.