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# Feminist Science Fiction: The Alternative Worlds of Piercy, Elgin and Atwood

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Since the late 1960s feminist authors have been writing prolifically in the genre of science fiction (SF), often merging and overlapping the other genres of fantasy. In its present practice, SF has become a blanket term covering nearly all the genres of fantasy, including utopian and dystopian fiction, the mystery, and the Gothic tale. As such, it has a special appeal to feminist writers, making it possible for them to create allegorical worlds in which the patriarchal society is questioned, or to produce female fantasies in which there is no oppression on the basis of gender or class. It moreover enables them to delineate alternative worlds to those created by the male writers of SF.

In fact, genre fiction has been congenial to women since the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century. As Sarah Lafanu argues, "contemporary science fiction does have roots in the nineteenth-century Gothic mode . . . and contemporary feminist science fiction draws on . . . the female Gothic, as exemplified in the works of Ann Radcliffe"(3). One of the earliest writers of SF is actually a woman, Mary Shelley, and her *Frankenstein* (1818) is generally regarded as the initiator of the genre (Cranny-Francis 8). *Frankenstein* anticipates the blending of the Gothic and SF forms, as well as those of utopian and dystopian fiction. The monster is at once a product of Gothic fiction and the prototype of the alien in SF. A critique of the social and scientific ideologies of the time is presented largely from the viewpoint of the alien or the outsider, which is a strategy of utopian and dystopian writing. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) is another fore-runner of contemporary feminist utopian and dystopian fiction in its dual purpose of revealing the atrocities of the dominant male social and political system, and of depicting the painful experience of being a woman oppressed by this patriarchal system (Lafanu 3).

For contemporary women writers SF serves several other purposes. Because it finds a large readership among both men and women, it has become a convenient vehicle for the articulation of feminist ideology, as well as of feminist literary theory. In its hybridization of genres and writing conventions, and its erosion of high and lowbrow cultures, feminist SF has been identified with postmodernist

concerns. However, as Anne Cranny-Francis argues, this identification is found to be detrimental to feminism.

Interesting attempts have been made to co-opt the "feminist voice"for postmodernism. Feminist generic fiction may be contemporary with much postmodernist writing and it may use some of the procedures (primarily, of course, the manipulation of genre conventions and the rejection of high/low culture classification), even for the same purposes (particularly the revelation of power operations in a patriarchal bourgeois society), but to subsume it into the category of postmodernism(s) is extremely dangerous. The classification of feminism *within* the discourse of postmodernism tends to suppress both the long history of women's oppression under patriarchy and their struggle against that oppression. (6)

Feminist writers and critics alike find contemporary European philosophy, including poststructuralist literary theory, inimical to women because it ignores the "epistemological contribution of feminism to the redefinitions of subjectivity and sociality"(De Lauretis 27). What also goes overlooked is the feminists' contribution to the deconstruction of hierarchies and received values.

SF is especially suitable for such feminist ideology because, given the free play of fantasy, patriarchal forms of discourse and narratology, as well as its symbols and myths, it can be disrupted more easily in the distanced space of some remote time or place. The choice of a popular genre is significant for the feminist writer, since securing a large readership is essential to her aim of ideological propaganda.

There is moreover a wonderful irony or clever stratagem in the feminist writer's adoption of SF and other popular genre forms. Masculinist criticism has generally relegated women's writing to "inferior"or "lowbrow"forms of writing, and for a long time only women writers who apparently sustained masculinist sets of values were suffered to be included among the mainstream writers. If Mary Ann Evans used the masculine penname of George Eliot for acceptability, the contemporary feminist SF writer Alice Sheldon has adopted the alias of James Tiptree, Jr. to lure her male readers into the ironic trap of her true gender position. Thus the feminist writer of SF assumes the disdained position of generic writing deliberately with the purpose of parodying, foregrounding, and subverting the generic conventions and narrative strategies of masculinist SF.

As Jenny Wolmark observes, feminist SF "functions disruptively within a masculinist popular genre, the generic outlines of which are already in the process of redefinition as the boundaries between high and popular culture become increasingly insecure"(3). As a narrative strategy, irony also serves, according to Nancy A. Walker, in the revision of patriarchal concepts. Irony as a mode "springs from a recognition of the socially constructed self as arbitrary, and that demands revision of values and conventions"(4).

Since it serves the purposes of feminism extraordinarily well, SF has become a medium of expression especially for second-wave feminism. Women writers writing in English on both sides of the Atlantic have been using the genre either continuously or intermittently. The larger number of these writers are Americans--Ursula K. LeGuin, Suzy McKee Charnas, Joanna Russ, Suzette Elgin, and James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), to name only a few of the better known. There are probably a variety of reasons for the preponderance of American women writers: "an important one must be the greater market for all SF in the USA. Until recently, British publishers have not been encouraging towards women writers of science fiction"(Lafanu 8). Among those mainstream women writers, American or British, who have used SF occasionally for the large possibilities it offers as a genre are Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Marge Piercy.

Although the stories told by these writers vary in content, many of them reveal similar narrative strategies and feminist concerns. Besides the deconstruction of existing narrative formulas and the employment of the ironic stance, intertextualityin which women writers use and/or modify other women's or men's textsis another common practice. Open-ended stories and stories in which the narrator provides alternative narrations, forever deconstructing or changing the previous ones she has told, are prevalently used. This strategy implies not only the existence of multiple realities but also the different possibilities of selfhood. The quest theme appropriated to feminist ends reveals that the woman character in search of identity seldom finds one as new identity is in a process of continual change. The theoretical and political issues dealt with are those which have been central to feminism: "reproductive and social technologies, male violence, motherhood and mothering, women's communities, gendered language systems, ecology, and the peace movement"(Andermahr 106).

I discuss in this article three novels which reflect virtually all these issues and the common narrative strategies of feminist SF, and which are among the best-known representatives of the genre. Marge Piercy's*Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is a relatively early example of the flourishing of SF in correlation with the leftist movement in the 1960s and second-wave feminism since the 1970s. Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue* (1984) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are examples of the outpouring of feminist SF that was prompted by the anti-feminist policies of the right-wing governments of Reagan and Thatcher in the mid-1980s.

Both Elgin and Atwood voice the common fear of feminists that such conservatism may end in women losing the rights they had fought very hard to win.

Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* is an example of the ways in which feminist SF exploits and adapts conventions from a variety of fantasy forms. Consuelo Ramos, or simply Connie as her friends call her, is the "woman on the edge of time,"for she travels in time from her dystopian world of New York in the 70s to

the utopian world of Mattapoisett (Massachussets) in the year 2137. Labeled insane and despised by the members of her contemporary society because of her lowly Chicano background, she is considered to be exceptional by the members of the future society because of her extraordinary receptiveness. The technicalities in her long medical record of insanity conceal and overlook the long history of oppression Connie has experienced in the acquisitive and repressive twentieth-century industrial society. Connie's male oppressors who rape, and beat her, and eventually commit her to the insane hospital; the violence of the racist, capitalistic society that deprives her of her rights as a citizen, and even of the guardianship of her daughter; and the cruelty of the medical system that treats her and her inmates as subhumans or guinea pigs are all depicted in the Gothic fashion.

Piercy uses a good many of the conventions of utopian fiction in presenting the world of Mattapoisett. Connie, the time traveler, is guided by Luciente, a young woman of Indian origin, who is a plant geneticist. She shows Connie their villages, homes, collective agriculture, and meeting places. "We don't have *big* cities--they didn't work"(68), Luciente explains on seeing Connie look disappointed. Industrial capitalism has been superseded by environmentally friendly economic systems in which production is based on need and cooperation rather than on profit and competition.

Connie realizes before long that this world of pastoral innocence and harmony is indeed highly developed both culturally and technologically. All the cultures are sustained indiscriminately in that nearly every village has a different culture, the values of which are maintained by people of different races. Gender discrimination no longer exists in this egalitarian society because men have been feminized to become mothers themselves. The privatized nuclear family has been eradicated, and children are born from machines called brooders, where the genetic material of the community is stored. As Luciente explains, all the old hierarchies have been broken, including women's natural right of mothering:

> It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally there was one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. . . . Cause as long as we are biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding. (105)

No individual or social group is given power because it would breed evil and mean the loss of freedom for others. Democracy has therefore taken on the form of communal decision-making by local councils which are open to all according to their interests and inclinations.

The utopian world of Mattapoisett is not the only alternative to Connie's dystopian world. It is the one in which she and all the oppressed people in her circle of friends--her daughter, her black lover, and nearly all her fellow inmates at the mental hospital--have counterparts in the utopian world where they have been raised socially and culturally. Most significantly, Luciente, with her Indian

background, is Connie's utopian analog, or "what Connie might have been in a different, just and equitable, social structure"(Cranny-Francis 130). Yet Piercy creates an even worse dystopian alternative to Connie's racist, industrial capitalistic system. Under the influence of drugs pumped into her blood, Connie blunders into this dystopian world of the future, where women have lost all their rights and been diminished into mere chattel in their sexual bondage. As Luciente asserts, "All things interlock. We are only one possible future. . . . Alternate universes coexist"(177). Convinced that determining the future depends on the choice she makes in the twentieth century, Connie destroys the immediate forces that threaten women of her position. Her killing of the doctors who are preparing to implant an electrical device in her brain in order to bring her under complete control is a kind of political activism. What awaits her in the present is endless confinement in the mental hospital, but she has kept her integrity and cherishes the hope that women in the future will be free--free to realize their feminist utopian dreams.

Elgin's *Native Tongue* depicts a future dystopia similar to the one Connie visits in her time travel, but the social and political issues it refers to are principally those of the mid-1980s. Political and religious conservatism of the time, in co-operation with industrial capitalism, has resulted in the complete loss of the constitutional rights of women living in the first quarter of the 23rd century in the United States:

> No female citizen of the United States shall be allowed to serve in any elected or appointed office, to participate in any capacity . . . in the scholarly or scientific professions, to hold employment outside the home without the written permission of her husband or (should she be unmarried) a responsible male related by blood or appointed her guardian by law, or to exercise control over money or other property or assets without such written permission. . . . All citizens of the United States of the female gender shall be deemed legally minors, regardless of their chronological age; except that they shall be tried as adults in courts of law if they are eighteen years of age or older. (7)

Women's regaining their rights depends on their creating a language of their own. Like a good many of the contemporary feminist writers, Elgin reveals that the gendered system of language has largely been responsible for women's bondage. Relying on her academic background as a professor of linguistics, she puts an even stronger emphasis on the need for women to devise an ungendered language system, which means creating an alternative reality whereby they can be liberated.

In this feminist dystopia, where women have been relegated to strictly domestic or menial jobs, only women of the linguist households are granted some form of restricted liberty to mix with the adult societies of men. Since male linguists alone cannot meet the great demand for interpreters in business negotiations held with the representatives from other countries and planets, their women are expected to serve them not only in these professional areas but also to bear as many linguist children as possible while they are still fruitful.

Nazareth, who has borne nine healthy children to the Chornyak Line of Linguists, is denied the privilege to have the regenerative surgery she needs after her

cancerous breast has been removed. Having been humiliated and past the age of child-bearing, she opts to join the other women in the Chornyak barrenhouse, the alien world to which women who no longer fit men's idea of womanhood are sent. The feminist metaphor of women as "aliens"in a phallocentric society carries a particular significance in Elgin's novel. It is through this alienation that women will succeed in developing their "native tongue"of Laadan, a language used only by women, and thus create an alternative world of their own. Defeated by the women at their male-oriented gender games, the men eventually perceive the reality of the situation: the problem is not "difficult to summarize. It can in fact be done in three words, thus: WOMEN ARE EXTINCT"(288)--that is, women as defined by men are extinct.

Women are thus given the liberty to live in a world of their own, which they will ultimately turn into an environment-friendly, egalitarian community, in contrast to the industrial and competitive society of men. Although the novel has an open end, there is room for hope. The "Preface"written by a Patricia Ann Wilkins, the "editor"of the novel--presumably a historical document--suggests that Laadan, the language of women, has survived through the joint efforts of women. It has developed into WOMANTALK, the universal language spoken by the women of different planets. Women have once more assumed professional positions in scholarly institutions such as the Historical Society of Earth, Womantalk (Earth Section), and the Meta Guild of Lay Linguists (Earth Section).

Using a fictional preface or appendix is a narrative strategy common not only to the three novels under study but also to the greater number of feminist SF works. Through this device the reader is taken out of the reality of the book and introduced to another, or parallel reality. The "Preface"of *Native Tongue;* the "Excerpts from the Official History of Consuelo Camacho Ramos,"appended to *Woman on the Edge of Time;* and the "Historical Notes,"appended to *The Handmaid's Tale,* all intensify the disparities between the parallel worlds--between the scientific attitude of the speaker(s) in the appended material and the actual suffering of the women depicted in the body of the work. This disparity is most obvious in *Woman on the Edge of Time,* in which the so-called scientific observations of the doctors in Connie's dystopian world relegate her to the position of a dangerously insane woman although she is regarded as an exceptional person, wonderfully sane and receptive, by the future utopian community. The appended material serves yet another purpose in *Native Tongue* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Claiming that the story presented has been based on certain historical documents, such as parts of a journal kept or tape recordings made by the central character, the speaker asserts that such dystopian worlds have been replaced by democratic governments. Yet the distancing between the time of the story and the time of the appendage once more alerts the reader to the impersonal and often gender-biased attitude of scholars and scientists to human suffering.

It is in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* that the feminist use of intertextuality is most manifest. In addition to the Biblical, mythical, and historical references, the book is replete with literary allusions. Of these, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* Orwell's *1984,* Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* and the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood* are probably the more obvious ones. Intertextuality, as used by postmodernist writers for breaking the barriers between the past and the present and revealing the continuum of human experience, serves yet another purpose as used by Atwood. It actually underscores the private experience of women's suffering through the ages. What is implied is that the same religious, social, and political ideologies that once victimized women--those phallocentric myths of the Western world that prescribe certain gender roles, while ostracizing those who refuse to conform--are not really anachronisms. They are highly viable in the 1980s and can be operative at any time in the future.

The choice of New England--Maine--as the setting for the dystopian world of Gilead partly derives from the fact that it was once the seat of Puritan New England, from where Atwood's ancestors came. Yet politics and religion being interrelated, one dictating the other, the oppression of women and the practice of polygamy are not peculiar to any one society or religion--be it Judeo-Christianity, Mormon, or Islam. The significant use of colors--red for handmaids, royal blue for the wives, green for the Marthas, and all these colors in stripes for the ecowives--has various religious and political connotations, all of which indicate the male-dictated roles for women. The uniformity in the plain style of dress also bears connotations of a military totalitarian order, which is governed by men dressed in black uniforms.

As in the larger number of dystopian fiction, science is linked with religion as a means to power and political oppression (Booker 30). The physical sterility of the Commanders and their wives, symbolic of their spiritual sterility, is the result of the scientific warfare going on between the world powers of the time. The handmaids' prescribed position as child-bearers, reducing them to "wombs on legs,"also forces on them the roles of mistresses, adulteresses, and prostitutes. All of this actually points to the social diseases that may arise from a fundamentalist application of religion and its scientific version in our time in the form of test-tube babies or surrogate mothers.

Another postmodernist narrative technique that Atwood adapts to feminist concerns is the use of circular narration. The first person narrator often deconstructs her previous accounts and offers different possible versions of the same situation. Yet as Offred, the narrator, implies, the reality of women's suffering has remained unaltered:

> I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it. . . . Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over , over again. . . . But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it. . . . By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I

believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (343-344)

Such a narrative technique not only reminds the reader of the plurality of realities and the possibility of alternative ones, but also modifies the conventional reading positions of texts, offering new ones.

The ability to use language in any medium renders a position of authority to the narrator, making it possible for her to reject male-oriented narrative formulas and realities, and create her own patterns and truths. It is through the disruption of a gender-biased language system that feminist alternatives can be realized. This is why Offred derives a virtual sexual pleasure when she plays scrabble with the Commander, beating him at his game by deconstructing old words and creating her own.

The deconstruction of formulaic narrative patterns is also found in the handling of the quest theme. Presented in the form of a quest in space or time, it is used in all three novels under study. In *The HandMaid's Tale*, it is both a physical search for Offred's lost mother and child, and a spiritual one for her own identity. The name Offred--her patronymic designating that she is the property of the Commander whose name is Fred--indicates that the roles imposed on her by the patriarchal system have obliterated her true identity. Her fragmented identity is further revealed in the broken images she sees of herself in effaced mirrors or shop windows (See Hengen; Rao; and Wilson). In the course of the book, she plays the roles of the Earth Mother, the scapegoat, and the Whore of Babylon. Even when she asserts herself in her protest against the oppressive powers, she is aided by her lover, Nick, who in a way prescribes another self for her. The open ending of the book implies the enigma of her situation: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing"(378).

That women are also culpable for the oppression exercised on them by men is suggested in all three novels, but presented most explicitly in *The Handmaid's Tale.* Serena Joy, with her new right-wing evangelicalism; Offred's mother, with her militant feminism; and, of course, Offred herself, with her passivity, and failure to stand up against the dangerous developments taking place before the government coup, are all responsible for the consequences. They all in turn become victims of the resulting system, not excluding the lesbian Moira, who puts up the strongest resistance both before and after the government overthrow. It is the Aunts, as best exemplified by Aunt Lydia, who are probably most guilty of enforcing this patriarchal/totalitarian rule on the members of their own sex. In the appendage of the book, the keynote speaker's words attest to this:

Gilead was, although patriarchal in form, occasionally matriarchal in content, like some sector of the social fabric that gave rise to it. As the architects of Gilead, knew, to institute an effective totalitarian system or indeed any system at all you must offer some benefits and freedoms, at least to a privileged few, in return for those you remove. (390)

The actual story of the novel reveals that once you deprive any gender, social, or racial group of their freedoms, all the others will eventually lose theirs, too, and become mere slaves of the system.

As demonstrated in *Woman on the Edge of Time, Native Tongue,* and *The Handmaid's Tale,* the alternative worlds created in feminist SF can be as varied as are women's dreams. They may be utopias or dystopias, resulting from the social and political context of the time in which they are written; they may be worlds created here on earth or in outer space in the foreseeable or distant future. These worlds may be acceptable only to women who are speaking as spokespersons for all women silenced by the patriarchal systems. The choice of SF as a genre enables the feminist writer to question not only the patriarchal social and political systems, but also the conventional narrative strategies employed by the male writers of the genre.

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