

Credibility of the Incredible Postmodern Science Fiction: A Rational Exploration of Inexplicable Phenomena and Unknown Corners of the Human Psyche

Reena Malhi

Assistant Professor in English
Hindu Kanya College
Kapurthala

ABSTRACT : *Postmodern Science fiction plays with the possibilities of interpretations of the real, its multiple perspectives and resultant uncertainties and is often a parody of this aimless quest by juxtaposing fact, fiction and fantasy. Postmodern writings persuades its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer or a mere blind follower of age old accepted concept of physical reality. It deals with contents such as future settings, futuristic science and technology, space travel, paranormal abilities, cybernetics, androids, humanoids, mutants, nuclear and bacteriological apocalypse, parallel realities, the deconstruction of temporal, spatial, and psychological categories, parasitical aliens, and bureaucracy of machines. Exploring the consequences of scientific innovations is one purpose of science fiction, making it a "literature of ideas". In the contemporary context, Postmodern Science fiction has established itself as a multi-disciplinary, legitimate branch of literature and a variety of science-fiction subgenres have emerged like, feminist science fiction, disaster novels and stories postulating alternative worlds; fantastic voyages to "inner space"; and "cyberpunk" novels set in "cyberspace" and many more. Moreover, the contemporary technological expansions provide fodder for Postmodern science fiction and also encourage the acquisition of fresh knowledge and fictional possibilities. As these limits increase, reality constantly changes. What is today pure fiction beyond the realm of ability can easily become possible and even normal tomorrow. The elements of scientific fact, fiction and fantasy in Postmodern science fiction have shattered accepted concepts regarding the nature of the reality.*

Keywords: *Postmodern Science Fiction, Temporal Distortion, Metafiction, Sci-Fi, Cyberpunk, Time Travels, Extra- Terrestrial, Virtual Reality, Fabualtion, Constructivism and Relativism.*

Postmodern Science fiction rejects the notion of the realism propounded by the Enlightenment ideas implicit in the Modernist literature. It plays with the possibilities of interpretations of the real, its multiple perspectives and resultant uncertainties. Instead of the modernist quest of meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author avoids, often playfully, the possibility of real meaning, and the postmodern science fiction is often parody of this aimless quest by juxtaposing fact, fiction and fantasy.

Postmodern writing challenges its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer.¹ More than this, it challenges its readers to interrogate the commonsense and commonplace assumptions regarding real world around him. As Patricia Waugh says that Postmodern fiction writers are more interested in fictionality.² They generally disregard the necessity for "willful suspension of disbelief" by employing techniques like Metafiction, Temporal distortion, Pastiche, Intertextuality, Techno culture and Hyperreality.

Epistemologically, Science fiction is a literary genre that extrapolates from existing knowledge about the real world to speculate about alternative worlds. It deals with contents such as future settings, futuristic science and technology, space travel, paranormal abilities, cybernetics, androids, humanoids, mutants, nuclear and bacteriological apocalypse, parallel realities, the deconstruction of temporal, spatial, and psychological categories, parasitical aliens, and bureaucracy of machines. Exploring the consequences of scientific innovations is one purpose of science fiction, making it a "literature of ideas". Science fiction is largely based on writing rationally about alternative possible worlds or futures.

³ It always includes an element of the fantastic, since it aims to go beyond "what if?" Yet, unlike pure fantasy or utopian literature, however, science fiction posits a rational exploration of inexplicable phenomena and unknown corners of the human psyche.

The term, Science fiction was first given general currency by Hugo Gernsback, editor of the American magazine *Amazing Stories* from 1926 onwards.⁴ Precursors of the genre include Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). But the true modern science fiction begins with Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la terre* (1864) and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895).

Postmodern Science fiction has gained greater respect after World War II. Postmodern writers like Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Doris Lessing, and Italo Calvino have expanded its range. Brian McHale, in *Postmodern Fiction*, did bring science fiction to bear upon his understanding of postmodernism: "Science fiction... is to postmodernism what detective fiction was to modernism."⁵

In the contemporary context, Postmodern Science fiction has established itself as a multi-disciplinary, legitimate branch of literature and a variety of science-fiction subgenres have emerged: feminist science fiction, disaster novels and stories postulating alternative worlds; fantastic voyages to "inner space"; and "cyberpunk" novels set in "cyberspace," a realm where computerized information possesses three dimensions in a "virtual reality." C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) uses science fiction as a vehicle for theological speculation, and works such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), and KurtVonnegut's Jr.'s *Cat's Cradle* (1963) demonstrate the particular effectiveness of the genre as an instrument of social criticism. Moreover, it

has become popular in the non-literary media, including film, television, and electronic games. *Star Wars* (1977) and its sequels and prequel, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *The Matrix* (1999), Indian movies like *Robot* (2004) and *Ra-One* (2011) are among the most financially successful motion pictures ever produced.

Scientific facts, fiction and fantasy have always been the limitless and wonderful fields that stimulated and pushed the boundaries of imagination. In the late twentieth century, these genres have been challenged beyond their traditional roles. Instead of temporarily suspending or gradually expanding notions of reality, the elements of scientific fact, fiction and fantasy in Postmodern science fiction have shattered accepted concepts regarding the nature of the reality. As Jean Baudrillard wrote in his famous *Simulacra and Simulation*, "the good old imaginary of science fiction is dead,... and something else is in the process of emerging."⁶ What is emerging is a new improved genre of imagination that blurs the boundaries of truth. It refracts and redefines reality. Reality is no longer static and known; it has transformed into a mirror for limitless possibilities and ideas in Postmodern science fiction.

By creating such new and unique ideas of truth and being, science fiction and fantasy have become vehicles for a postmodern view of reality, commonly called constructivism or relativism. The notion that reality and truth are a construct rather than an entity or an essence is one of the major concerns of Postmodernist fiction. According to relativism, reality is neither a concrete thing nor knowable through human perception. As a constructivist, Walter Truett Anderson in his famous book, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be* wrote, disagreement now is "not merely conflict between beliefs, but conflict about belief itself"⁷ This constant searching, rejecting, and creating nature of postmodernism is reflected in various aspects of science fiction and fantasy which stem from a conglomeration of progressive and intertwined social changes that form the very foundation of postmodernism.

Postmodern ideas of redefining reality are further supported by the "shock" element of late twentieth century science fiction and fantasy. The authors of science fiction and fantasy continuously try to surprise and shock their audiences by describing scenes of ever increasing extremes and oddities. *The Undying* by Mudrooroo, a vampire trilogy, for example, the novel is about the tale of Jangamutuk and his tribe who have fled north to escape the white "ghosts".⁸ The known and traditional image of the vampire transforms into an unforeseen and unknown element. In *The Undying*, the accepted vampire myth is no longer a part of reality; it changes with the author's words.

Similarly, Richard Harland's use of extreme and shocking details in Postmodern Science fiction, *The Dark Edge* reflects postmodern blurred reality. This novel contains numerous explicit and unbelievable scenes:

The bath was half-filled with murky slop, dark red with bits of pink and brown-purple. The pink bits were segments of human flesh, the brown-purple were human organs. They protruded above the surface of the slop like meat in a casserole....He got into the bath with the dismembered body. He wallowed around in the blood and slop.⁹

Horrifying, fictional yet quite real, spine-shuddering and gruesome descriptions jolt the reader out of his safe, accepted world. Postmodern science fiction writers are more interested in truth than beauty. In such cases, the Postmodern author reshapes the reader's desire for the aesthetic. He exposes that reality is not necessarily beautiful or even acceptably pleasing. In novels like *The Dark Edge*, the reader is confronted with scenes that are unpleasant, terrifying, many a time unwanted and unimaginable. As constructivism espouses, reality is no longer a known concept. Like the text itself, reality becomes shocking and unknown. Here, the Postmodern science fictionist redefines not only the reality but also juxtaposes fact, fiction and fantasy by employing the Postmodern paradigms of Fabulation, Metafiction, Faction, Intertextuality, Pastiche, Paradox, Parody, Defamiliarization, Discontinuity and Destabilization. In this way, Postmodern science fiction is a free literature not bound by mimeses and verisimilitude proposed by the Enlightenment ideas implicit in the Modernist literature.

Another element of recent science fiction and fantasy that helps depict a postmodern sense of reality is the incorporation of the purely fantastic into an otherwise normal world. For example, *The Undying* initially looks like a common historical fiction, a story of past aborigines in Australia and Tasmania. With the incorporation of the characters' dreams, however, the reader gets a sudden unexpected shock. The little boys get transformed into flying dingos and strong-willed wives are sailing the skies, shooting deadly red lasers out of their eyes.¹⁰ Fantastic scenes like these obviously exclude the novel from being placed in the realistic fiction category. The famous philosopher Immanuel Kant supported this technique when he states, "Imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself".¹¹

Postmodern science fictions like Calvino's *Cosmicomics*, Mudrooroo's *The Undying* and Richard Harland's *The Dark Edge* clearly juxtapose actual historical figures and events with the fantastic and modify reality. By refusing to follow the laws of reason, Postmodern science fiction breaks free from the objectivist version of reality where everything is concrete and understandable through reason and science. Thus, the result is the Postmodern liberal relativism which shows reality to be subjective, shifting and ever-improving relative to each individual. Postmodernism is all about challenging the limitations and traditionally accepted principles and notions about our mother planet and other fabricated unexplored worlds – in the space or in the human psyche.

In addition to this seamless blend of the fantastic elements into traditional reality, Postmodern science fiction projects that humans are no longer the most powerful or the most intelligent creation of the universe. For example, the 1999 movie *The Matrix* shows a world seemingly identical to the present. Yet, the protagonist, Neo confronts that what is unquestionably considered real is actually nothing but a masking dream. Thus, his accepted notion of reality is shattered violently. In the Postmodern science fiction, the transformed reality centers not around humans, but around machines, artificial intelligence that human beings invented themselves. Instead of dominating the world, humans are complete slaves to their own creations, living entirely in a dream while their bodies are used for energy. In Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa, the main character is transformed into an insect and he fights with the unidentified creations for his ultimate survival. In a way, such Post modern Sci-Fi works challenge as well as send shuddering warning to the human race to curb its exploitation of the natural resources and revere the unknown, unexplored and the life existing beyond his home planet; so that the survival of human race can be maintained along with other parallel worlds and dimensions of reality. "Live and let others live" is an inherent message of these works of Postmodern literature. So, Post modern Science Fiction has proved a true and influential instrument in redefining and reshaping reality by juxtaposing fact, fiction and fantasy.

Moreover, the contemporary technological expansions provide fodder for Postmodern science fiction and also encourage the acquisition of fresh knowledge and fictional possibilities. As these limits increase, reality constantly changes. What is today pure fiction beyond the realm of ability can easily become possible and even normal tomorrow. Due to the rapid progressive advancement of technology, reality is now popularly considered to be shifting. At present, reality is not what we are forced to perceive by the social parameters and human physical limitations. Something inexplicable exists beyond our capacity of perception and comprehension. Postmodern Sci-Fi has erased the line of demarcation between material and earthly real world and extra-terrestrial, highly technological world. There lies the beauty and irresistible charm of Postmodern literature and especially of Postmodern Science Fiction that even incredible appears credible. Inexplicable and unknown do not baffle modern reader, rather serve as a gateway for further exploration and adventure. Time travels, aliens and fictitious elements used in Postmodern Sci-Fi have also paved way for the scientific research and investigation.

Baudrillard explains the postmodernist slant of recent science fiction in relation to the changes brought about by the exponential growth of technology: "Until now we have always had a reserve of the imaginary—now the coefficient of reality is proportional to the reserve of the imaginary."¹² As technology advances, future possibilities become present realities. Postmodern science fiction is an embodiment of this change.

Increased technology has led to globalization, another important sociological change that heralded Postmodernism. Instead of observing life, truth, and reality from just one window, globalization forces one to see through the countless other windows that show reality from a different vantage point. *The Undying* and *Cosmicomics* are the wonderful products of globalization

Indeed, Postmodern science fiction has revolutionized the concept of reality. In *Simulacra and Science* Baudrillard states that it is necessary to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because real has disappeared from our lives. In fact, now various hyperrealities have replaced fiction and reality.¹³ Postmodern science fiction by intermingling fact, fiction and fantasy has allowed valid realities to exist independently and simultaneously. Postmodern science fiction in the early twenty-first century is an unstoppable expansive force that is certainly not limited to one particular genre. Science fiction literature, once ghettoized and marginalized, is all-pervasive in even more rapidly garnering respect.

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