Feminist Post Cyberpunk Fiction : An Emerging Genre in Literary Writing

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Abstract

The popularity of science fiction in the 1970s and 1980s proved there was a huge interest in reading this genre. These novels were largely read and appreciated off the women too. The authors of this science fiction novels provides a fascinating experience to readers by interestingly weaving their stories in a speculative setting of scientific premises. As against the suppression from masculine society, science fiction has a particular affinity with feminism. The continuation of this affinity can be viewed in the subgenres too. Feminist post cyberpunk fiction is also one such sub genre which has enriched the speculative fiction. In recent times considerable progress has been attained in literature in the field of feminist post cyberpunk fiction. But as they have been sufficiently explored , an attempt has been made in the present paper to sketch out the evolution of feminist post cyberpunk fiction from the science fiction. This paper attempts to throw light on the Various focal points in feminist post cyberpunk fiction and provides examples for each type.

Key Words

Science fiction, feminism, cyberpunk fiction, post cyberpunk fiction etc.

Article

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The general tendency of the human nature, especially, the masculine world is to suppress women as the second sex. But by introducing new concepts and approaches, feminism, a collection of movements and ideologies, aims at defining , establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights for women and also helping women to find a recognized place in the society which was once denied.

Although a genre defined and long dominated by man, science fiction has a particular affinity with feminism. It becomes clear with the publication of such challenging books such as *Walk to the End of World*(1974) *and Motherlines (1978)*by Sucy McKee Charnas , ' *Female Man(1975)* by Joanna Russ and Marge Piercy 'S *Woman on the Edge of Time(1976).* However, the impact of feminism on the science fiction field observed not only in the science fiction texts themselves, but also on the feminist approaches to science fiction criticism and history, as well as conversations and debates in the science fiction community.

As an incredibly complex genre, it can be divided into dozens of subgenres, each with their own unique themes and attributes. But any science fiction story can cross the boundaries of several of its subgenres, or even break off into its own cult category. Charting the entire universe of sci-fi subgenres would therefore be impossible, but some of its most heavily populated subdivisions are military science fiction, robot fiction, social science fiction, space opera, cyber punk, bio punk, nanopunk, superhero fiction, gothic science fiction, and so on.

Despite being a popular subgenre across different types of media, cyberpunk focuses on a combination of lower and high -tech life featuring advanced scientific advancements such as artificial intelligence and cybernetics, juxtaposed with a degree of break down or radical change in the social order. Specifically, cyberpunk deals with the link between biology and computer technology, and explores humanity's changing

relationship with computer systems. Virtual reality, prosthetics, cyborgs and internet frauds, are all part of the cyberpunk niche.

Although cyberpunk initially springs from literature, it soon spread into film, graphic novels and visual arts. It originated with a group of writers and their works include William Gibson's *Necromancer* (1984), Bruce Sterling's *Artificial Kid*(1980) , Ruby Rucker's *Software* (1982)etc. The label cyberpunk itself constitutes a portmanteau derived from 'cybernetics' and 'punk ' the American British counterculture movement of the late 1970s from which the genre took numerous ideologies and aesthetics. In addition to the works of the afore mentioned authors' works, classic examples of cyberpunk also include the films *Blade Runner*(1982)*, The Lawnmower Man(*1992)*, Tron*(1982)*, Brainstorm(*1983)*, Akira(*2016)*, Ghost in the Shell*(1995) and so on.

Contrasting with cyberpunk's technophobia and its Manichean demonization of globalization, post-cyberpunk, a spin off from the early 1990s, promoted an unbiased assessment of technology, analyzed the influence of computers from wide variety of unprejudiced perspectives and, approached the social issues that cyberpunk overlooked in regard to the benefit of modern technology. Cyberpunk's pessimistic perspectives developed from the paranoid speculations about the impending presence of computer technology in the 1980s, since these machines were still unavailable in those years and they were deemed to become oppressive, deleterious and constructive. Nevertheless, as soon as computer technology became more accessible in the mid 1990s, the fatalist views of cyberpunk were left behind while a new generation of science fiction. The authors rendered neutral and profound examinations in their narratives about the impact of cyber technologies and thus gave post cyberpunk a boost to manifest itself to a solid genre. In their introduction to *Rewired: The Post Cyberpunk Anthology,* James Patrick Kellyand John Kessel points out that:

> Post cyberpunk possibly emerged because science fiction authors and the general population began using computers, the internet and PDAs to their benefit, without the massive social fragmentation of its Information Revolution predicted in the 1970s and 1980s. (57)

In addition, cyber punk was declared dead in as much as it became schematic and dogmatic. To provide a fresh scope on cybernetic culture and the globalization of Informatics, post cyberpunk took up the baton and approached divorce issues related to our modern socio economic structures, proposing up to date paradigms, the necessity to include technology in our lives and more objective examinations of these phenomena within its narratives. In this manner, group of authors, including Greg Bear, Greg Egan, Neal Stephenson, Raphael Carter, Charles Stross, Richard Calder and Richard Morgan, introduce innovative works that discussed an assortment of contemporary subjects such as nano technology, feminism, biological reproduction, family structure, education, information, alternate universes, mythology, political paradigms, the after life, the meaning of life and philosophy. Additionally post cyberpunk narratives alternate the dystopian environments of cyber punk with utopian settings or, more accurately with detached, unbiased depictions of Cybernetic societies.

In spite of the success of post-cyber punk, this genre never received the abundant academic attention that cyberpunk obtained. The relevance or even the actual existence of post-cyberpunk, occurred mostly in online and rarely in scholarly essays. Lawrence Person, perhaps one of the few serious apologists, became the first academic to define and explore the genre. Person's seminal definition of post-cyberpunk, however effectively enumerates some of its most important traits, identifies its contribution, and provides the basis to recognize it as an independent and solid genre:

> Post-cyberpunk uses the most world building technique (as cyberpunk) but features different characters, settings and most importantly, makes fundamental assumptions about the future. Far from being alienated loners, post-cyberpunk characters are frequently integral members of society (i. e they have jobs). They live in futures that are not necessarily dystopic (indeed they are often suffused with an optimism that ranges from cautious to exuberant), but their everyday lives are still impacted by rapid technological change and an omnipresent computerized infrastructure. (9)

After a brief spud that lasted less than a decade, new set of critics and authors simultaneously were rewriting these narratives: authors like Donna Haraway Linda Nagatha, Laura Nixon, Nichola Griffith, Larisa Lai, Nalo Hopkinson and Annie Sullivan. To encompass the stylistic and thematic complexities of these authors, the term 'feminist post cyberpunk ' can be used as both sub genres feminist science fiction and post cyberpunk fiction contribute to this latest generation of science fiction, which explores the relationship between technology and the body in a generalized world. The exact anxieties about gender relations and technology are at the center of today's feminist post-cyberpunk science fiction.

Feminist post cyberpunk takes the best parts of cyberpunk, cyberspace, biotechnological engagement and urban dystopia , while rejecting its sexist masculine claims for both the subject and technology. One of the most striking points of the feminist scholars when reading cyberpunk has been the centrality of the cyberspace cowboy usually a young man who plugs into the feminized cyberspace matrix to become the idealized hacker hero. Focusing on the foundational work of William Gibson's Neuromancer series, Nixon argues:

> The political potential for science fiction, realized so strongly in 70s feminist science fiction, is regulated in Gibson 's cyberpunk to a form of scary feminized software; his fiction creates an alternative, attractive, but hallucinatory world which allows not only a reassertion of male mastery but a virtual celebration of a kind of primal masculinity. (204)

Feminist post-cyberpunk rejects this 'primal masculinity ', with its displacement of the vulnerable body in favor of a broader consideration of what it means to be gendered in an age where technology exists both inside and outside of the body. This is an incarnation of science fiction literature that distinctively strive to challenge cultural consumptions of difference and identity in a technologically mediated global world.In some ways, it is seeming to be followed the lead of critics like Booth who notes that:

> Women writers of cyber fiction tend to focus on the socially and economical marginal: Unlike classic cyberpunk tales of "hacker cowboy" outsiders women of color, illegal workers, handicapped characters, lesbians, the poor and the homeless populate these novels. Technology has not erased sexism racism and heterosexism in these words; so much as it has exaggerated them and given them new forms.(31)

All ways to find an apt example leads to the milestone works such as Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*, Sullivan's *Maul*, Nixon's *Proxies* etc. All these novels are populated with such marginalized characters : women of color clones, aliens, lesbians, children the poor and the disabled. In each text these figures directly interact with or literary embody technology and challenged normatively gendered, raciest and the able-ist construction of the human.

Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* is the novel, that most fully embodies the feminist post cyberpunk sensibility. The key element that distinguishes *Midnight Robber* feminist post cyberpunk novel is Hopkinsons's attention to issues of race and colonization in terms of the reproduction of bodies and

subjectivities in technology (dis) located spaces. In addition to interrogating the relationship between technology and the body, Hopkinson further in wondering that those future bodies may look like and how they will be treated. In a genre traditionally inhabited mostly by white bodies, *Midnight Robber* rejects normative images racialized others and proposes new diasporic communities of belonging. As a feminist post cyberpunk novel, *Midnight Robber* also exemplifies the search for the balance between the technological and the natural. , the automated and the human.

Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* exemplifies the way in which feminist post cyberpunk science fiction establishes a new critical literature with its exploration of cloning and biotechnology in a world perishing under ruampant capitalism. While the notion of creating new life with technology is nothing unusual. Lai's treatment of the issue of cloning strikes a balance between condemnation and acceptance of such novel identifies. As a feminist post-cyberpunk novel, Salt *Fish Girl* confronts modern notions of the body, identity and legitimacy. Along side her investigation of cloning, Lai takes on virtual reality and the ways in which it changes the definition of laboring body and the social identity. Morris comments that Lai 'S works to exposition identity as a site of individual and social transformation "(82). *Salt Fish Girl* defemiliarizes the very notion of human identity as the narrative's clones goes to great lengths to assert and preserve their humanity, despite being denied recognization as humans. In this way Lai's novel continues the tradition of feminist science fiction to question the role of the alien or monster in the society. At the center Salt Fish Girl is the role of the alien or cloned other and what happens to definition of human being when technology becomes the inspiration for corporal design and corporeal interest dictate the constitution of bodies.

Sullivan in *Maul* reflects the post cyberpunk approach to the bodies displayed in her story to varying degrees of seriousness and parody. There is no mapping or possession of cyberspace in *Maul*, but rather an exploration of the way certain bodies interface with biotechnologies that have their own inherent programmes and coding. In *Maul*, Sullivan creates bodies that ultimately fail in their attempts to maintain plasticity in the face of a human made biotechnological catastrophe. , where viral men have been nearly wiped out due to the Y-Plague. Sullivan takes the 1970s feminist utopia science fiction gender role reversal to its extreme: in the world of *Maul* , women are in control of society and men are reduced to breeding stock. Instead of breaking out the restrictive gender norms women end up reiterating preexisting masculine and feminine social construction. Rejecting the earth -goddess centered feminist utopias of the 1970s, Sullivan explores the limit of human plasticity in a world, both real and virtual, where women are in control.

Laura Mixon has garnered moderate attention from the academic and fan science fiction communities for her novels *Glass Houses* and *Proxies.* Both cyberpunk and science fiction camps have claimed Mixon as their own, which blisters my designation of her work as feminist post cyberpunk. As a feminist text *Proxies* complicates embodied notions of desire and identification. Mixon consistently upsets the conventional cyberpunk attachment to the machine interface as transcendent by underscoring the physical vulnerability of her characters.

By and large the point made in this paper is that as the ideological and theoretical discourses of feminism aiming the equality between male and female, the genre of   feminist post cyberpunk fiction practiced by a few women writers fictionalizing the anxieties over novel technologies such as cloning, genetically modified foods, nano technology, virtual reality, telepresence, and artificial intelligence as they infiltrate daily life and threaten to transform the definitions of human being.

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