

Science Fiction as a Medium for Social Critique: Gender Dynamics on Selected Sci-Fi Novels Across Generations

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Abstract: The openness of the genre Science Fiction enables it to address imaginative and crucial concerns of modern society. Gender inequality, systemic oppression and environmental degradation are critiqued in the selected sci-fi works: *Frankenstein*, *Frankissstein* and *The Stone Gods* respectively. This paper will draw upon science fiction as “the literature of cognitive estrangement” a definition coined by Darko Suvin (1979) in analysing science fiction as a tool of critical theory. Science Fiction therefore is “the literature of cognitive estrangement” (Suvin, 1979) which makes use of “estrangement” or defamiliarization of the world as we know it to create a critical distance between the reader and their sociological context.

Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) critiques gender inequality by allowing a male-character to steal womanhood's biggest contribution - childbirth. Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* (2019) critiques binary gender conventions by centring a transgender character, allowing readers to critique modern gender expectations. The novel also critiques the power relations of creating life and consciousness. Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) critiques womanhood's marginalization in corporate-and-colonial power structure induced dystopian world.

Frankenstein enables systemic oppression to be critiqued through the reader's symbiosis with the Creature. *Frankissstein* critiques systemic subjugation through its representation of artificial intelligence and transhumanism. *The Stone Gods* critiques systemic subjugation in corporations and colonial government and offers spotlight to the consequences of unchecked power. It also criticizes environmental negligence and interconnectedness to it by the mankind. Through the setup of a dystopian society as a result for humankind's abuse towards earth, the novel portrays the urgency of ethical consideration in the anthropocentric world.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Gender Inequality, Environmental Degradation, Artificial Intelligence, Transhumanism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Looking at a society and its writing through the lens of science fiction shows that there is symbiotic relationship between the two and that it serves as a witness to the fears, hopes, and complexities of the society. As a genre, it has the capacity to extrapolate contemporary issues into specified futures or alternative realities that offer a critical view of contemporary society through shifting the familiar power struggles and placing them in unfamiliar settings. This paper analyses how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Jeanette Winterson's novels *Frankissstein* (2019) and *The Stone Gods* (2007) adopt gendered representations of creative power to critique and refigure societal hierarchies. However,

these texts are separated by centuries but share common concern with ethical, social, and gendered implication of creation. By analysing how these novels deal with gender, power, and creation, this paper argues that science fiction is uniquely used as a tool to engage with and question current issues of society, power structures and gender roles.

Renowned feminist scholars including Donna Haraway, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have claimed that Sci-Fi is a perfect ground for restructuring gender identities and relationships. Feminist thought by Judith Butler, gender as performative (1990), as a series of repeated acts within a regulatory matrix that bring about the illusion of a stable gender identity offers useful concepts in understanding how

Shelley and Winterson denaturalize gender in their speculations and denaturalize gendered categories and behaviour. Haraway in her *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) deconstructs binary oppositions such as gender and identity and proposes the cyborg as an appropriate allegory for a gender spectrum that is fluid and semi-ethnic, subverting patriarchal definitions.

The Madwoman in the Attic (1979) authored by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examines the ways in which women writers have negotiated patriarchal literary traditions which form themes in Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Winterson's works. Ursula K. Le Guin's work, particularly *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), explores a genderless society, enhancing readers to question the naturalization of gender roles in modern society.

Theories of power and discourse by Michel Foucault, sheds a light on how these texts critique the structures of power in society. Power is seen by Foucault as repressive and productive; an authority that produces discourses, subjectivities, norms and identities. In *Frankenstein*, *Frankissstein*, and *The Stone Gods*, these principles are questioned and demonstrated ranging from the scientific pursuits of Victor Frankenstein, to Winterson's futuristic visions of corporate dystopias. The notions of creation as power, producing discourse, knowledge and subjectivity – as articulated by Foucault (1980), underpins an examination of how creation is functioning in these narratives; it is in this respect that Foucault's ideas of power and knowledge become particularly relevant as it demonstrates the role of dominance discourse in legitimizing the authority of creation - whether it be biological life, artificial intelligences or technologies.

II. SOCIAL CRITIQUE

The novels *Frankenstein*, *Frankissstein*, and *The Stone Gods*, subvert these legitimate discourses by transferring creative authority across gender, and introducing paradigms which re-shape understandings of creation. Creation in these novels can refer to much more than merely life or technology, and extends to the construction of social orders, identities and narratives. As the creators themselves having the power to conceive and fabricate new realities, science fiction texts serve as powerful site of creative power: raising questions of who has the authority to create, and whose voices are suppressed. The creative act within these novels therefore, is not so much to do with the physical creation of organisms or technology but more to do with imposing ordering, identities and narratives on the chaotic state of politics and economics. In the novels *Frankenstein*, *Frankissstein* and *The Stone Gods* the relationship between gender and power is recurrent and explored through creation and its implications.

➤ *Challenging Gender Roles:*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* challenges notions of gender roles by giving man the role of childbirth with dire consequences. Victor Frankenstein's violation of the laws of creation and the unethical nature of his work serve as a critique of the patriarchal dominance of science. Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*, continues this by considering the

consequence of scientific power on our own contemporary world. In this modern reiteration of *Frankenstein*, the novel's protagonist, Ry Shelley- the transgender doctor, personifies an understanding of gender that challenges binary interpretations of gender; while *Frankenstein* indirectly critiques the patriarchal establishment. The Creature's existence is a testament to the destructive implications of unchecked patriarchal science in creation. The arrogance of Victor's creation, ultimately leads to his destruction – an undeniable example of the dangers of patriarchal creation of life and society. In *The Stone Gods*, Winterson examines patriarchal systems through the consequences of both corporate and colonialist creation. In a society devastated by human exploitation of both technology and resources, Billie Crusoe- the protagonist of the novel, embodies an understanding of gender that rejects oppressive, patriarchal structures; while also embodying the subversion of the existing creation structures by imagining and embodying a different sort of existence.

➤ *Agency and Resistance*

Frankenstein represents an argument for the need of the socially marginalized to assert themselves. The Creature's struggle for acceptance within a prejudiced society, along with the social and psychological impacts of this alienation clearly demonstrate the repercussions of systematic prejudice. Ry Shelly's quest for self within the rapidly advancing fields of artificial intelligence and transhumanism in *Frankissstein*, stands as an analysis of current social phenomena. The act of rebellion against power structures, as seen with Billie Crusoe in *The Stone Gods*, draws connection between gender, power and environmental justice. Scientific creation according to *Frankenstein*, has the power to both challenge and endanger; and the irresponsible, often narcissistic, manner in which Victor creates the Creature questions the responsibility inherent in creation, and the limitations of scientific creation. The ideas surrounding creation, in the sense of giving artificial intelligence or transhuman beings as the authority of conscious existence, were continued and debated in *Frankissstein*; and in *The Stone Gods* creation comes in the form of subjugation and destruction of environmental entities.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is regarded as a work that challenges patriarchal literary traditions, having been written by a woman, writing in a patriarchal society. The writing of Jeanette Winterson as well as subverting the expected power relationships through exploring themes of gender, identity, and environmental justice; consequently, addressing and challenging contemporary societal issues.

III. CONCLUSION

Frankenstein, *Frankissstein*, and *The Stone Gods* are science fictions that present unique yet related critique on how gender influences creative power within diverse technologies. Their exploration, from masculine scientific pursuits in *Frankenstein*, to the representation of transgendered embodiment in *Frankissstein*, and ultimately environmental devastation in *The Stone Gods*, depicts science fiction's potency in deconstructing societal structures, while

imagining new possibilities; and in this way, are works that can inspire reflection on contemporary issue in reproduction, artificial intelligence and the management of resources, as well as providing hope and alternative visions for the future.

Science Fiction in the 21st century provides a crucial site for exploration of the intersections between gender, power and creation. The nature of reproductive technologies, artificial intelligence, and the creation of societies are all questioned and reimagined, in order to denaturalise existing structures of power and conceive of alternative futures. The capacity for these science fiction texts to both challenge existing realities, and to project hopeful visions for a different sort of future makes them unique works that can provide valuable insights into many contemporary debates surrounding reproductive rights, gender identity and technological advancement.

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