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A SIGNIFICANT ABSENCE

Since the early days of the convention, science fiction writers have been primarily interested in science and technology as well as their impact on individuals and societies in the near or distant future – that is, a world that has not yet materialised. Women have not been the main focus of their reflections. Why? Piotr Gorliński-Kucik, PhD, a literature studies expert and science fiction researcher, asserts that this literary convention is stereotypically male and that the absence of women, especially in the first stages of its development, is due to a few specific reasons.

The absence of women in science fiction literature is grounded in the origins of the convention. Some scholars argue that sci-fi dates as far back as antiquity, with certain elements appearing in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the works of Aristophanes. However, the current as we know it today developed in the early 20th century. The term science fiction itself was made popular in the 1920s by the American publisher Hugo Gernsback. The first issue of *Amazing Stories*, the first ever magazine dedicated to science fiction, was published in 1926. The names of the authors featured in this issue alone are notable, including Jules Verne, Herbert George Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe.

This literary convention originally began as stories about tinkering, science, and technology, and therefore touched on subjects that were generally reserved for young boys and male adolescents. In the 1920s and 1930s, popular science

fiction magazines in the US focused on masculinity and featured male protagonists often exaggerating their roles in the creation of future worlds, whereas women were portrayed in ways that are now considered sexist. It was male prose from the very beginning. Interestingly, the writer Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* (1818), is considered the 'founding mother' of modern science fiction.

The first feminist writers to emerge at the turn of the 20th century focused on themes such as gender inequality, race, sexuality, and reproduction. Some of the most notable works of feminist science fiction developed these themes either through utopia, showing a society in which gender differences or gender power imbalances do not exist, or dystopia, presenting worlds in which gender inequalities are exacerbated, thus indicating the need for feminist work to continue. Science fiction has proven

very useful in presenting the goals of feminism: worlds free of sexism where women's contributions (to science) are recognised and valued, worlds that explore the diversity of women's needs and desires, and worlds that transcend gender.

The 1960s and 1970s are known as the golden years of science fiction. Some of the greatest science fiction writers published their best works at that time, i.e. Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, and Stanisław Lem, among others. Yet, the female characters in their novels confirm the stereotypes and reflect the patriarchal order of society, or, as in Lem's case, women are not only not the main characters, but do not appear at all, or if they do appear, they are reduced to a single function and even objectified. However, other novels begin to be published, including those by Ursula K. Le Guin, author of science fiction



and fantasy books. Many of her works are regarded as science fictions classics, such as the *Earthsea* and the *Hainish Cycle* series. In her novels, she often used the theme of extraterrestrial cultures to make statements about human culture. She also touched on the essence of gender identity, using the motif of an androgynous race in her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Such approaches positioned her novels in the category of feminist science fiction.

There was also Joanne Russ, the author of such novels as *The Female Man* and *We Who Are About To*, who became one of the best-known feminists in the history of science fiction. She was not only a writer but also a lecturer and literary critic. In 1971, she published the article titled *The Image of the Woman in Science Fiction*, putting forward the argument that there were no women in science fiction, only their images. She pointed out that there was a lack of reflection on

family, division of social roles, sexuality, and gender identity – and it was these themes that began to appear in women's science fiction in the 1970s and 1980s. Interestingly, the emergence of feminist science fiction in the 1970s also introduced the concept of environmental awareness.

Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood complete the list of female authors of this period. Octavia Butler is the first recognised and award-winning African-American science fiction writer, whose novels present a view of humanity as inherently flawed by its innate tendency towards hierarchical thinking, which leads to intolerance, violence, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, and all the other '-isms'. Margaret Atwood's best-known work is the dystopian feminist novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is a psychological study of a young woman placed in an extreme life situation. The totalitarian state created in the wake of

an environmental catastrophe is a symbol of patriarchal hegemony, in which women have been completely excluded from public spaces, divided into castes of wives, mothers, mistresses and servants, and subsumed by the social role they perform.

Contrary to appearances, science fiction is a conservative literary convention, and the authors are still predominantly male. Piotr Gorliński-Kucik, PhD, proposes that science fiction should be treated not only as a literary convention but also as a way of thinking – critical of the present, the technology, and the future. We should read science fiction and think in the style of science fiction because it prepares us for a better tomorrow, helps us analyse the world we live in and adjust to changes, and allows us to think about the future in an open-minded way. In this world, women, their points of view, their emotions, and their needs cannot be missing.