

## Speculative Women, Future Bodies

Science Fiction has allowed many women to re-imagine their place in society, as a hypothetical future can challenge universal 'truths' about gender, race, and sexuality. This theme traces many such futures through pivotal works from the 70's to more modern works that continue to confront our collective past.

Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975)

Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (1993)

Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti* (2015)

G. Willow Wilson, *Ms. Marvel, Vol.1: No Normal* (2014)

In Ursula K. LeGuin's 1976 article, "Is Gender Necessary?", she writes that "One of the essential functions of science fiction, I think, is precisely this kind of question-asking: reversals of a habitual way of thinking, metaphors for what our language has no words for as yet, experiments in imagination." The article was a response to criticism of her landmark science-fiction novel, ***The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)**, about an alien species that only assumes gender once a month for the purpose of procreation, suggesting that gender could be separate from alien (and by extension, *human*) identity. As she goes on to write, "Because of our lifelong social conditioning, it is hard for us to see clearly what, besides purely physiological form and function, truly differentiates men and women. Are there real differences in temperament, capacity, talent, psychic process, etc.? If so, what are they?"

Indeed, it is still difficult for most humans to think, read, or write in a world without clearly-defined gender distinctions, all the more so in languages that assign gender to a keyboard and a book. Since we lack the simple vocabulary for such a futuristic thought experiment, science fiction can bridge the gap between history and technology to contemplate the ultimate *what if*. The books in this theme take us to many possible futures, but always to confront, rather than escape, the past. For example, they allow us to speculate on the limits--whether real or imagined--of a woman's body when not defined by a man's. Or to imagine what women's writing might have looked like in a world without men or a male tradition. Additionally, they allow us to trace a woman's identity across the busy intersection of culture, gender, and ethnicity in the no-man's land of uncharted space.

Science fiction is the ideal medium for speculation since it exists in a world we can never visit, in a future we will never become. For both 'space' and the 'future' are metaphors, artistic abstractions that mirror our own imaginary voyages in the present. In science fiction, we are always orbiting our own time, our familiar Earth. The books in this theme show how the recent past (the 60's-90's) echoes the ripped-from-the-headlines agenda of the 21<sup>st</sup> century virtually unchanged. And while gender might ultimately be something we transcend, for the present it remains our most intractable taboo, and one that shapes the destinies of children just learning to voice the question themselves.

***The Left Hand of Darkness*** is arguably the alpha and omega of this discussion, which it created by imagining a race of ambisexual beings for whom male and female are possibilities, not origins. Because of this, the roles of husband and wife, mother and father, provider and supporter are no longer distinctions of power.

Similarly, Joanna Russ's ***The Female Man (1975)*** imagines several alternative futures for women, including a world where a plague has created a female utopia, and others where women are trapped in roles of submission and servitude. As the women travel from one reality to another, Russ questions how gender shapes identity, and whether any utopia can exist without the contribution of an equal and balanced society.

Octavia Butler's ***The Parable of the Sower (1993)*** takes this a step further by offering a female savior, Lauren Olamina, who will lead humanity from a ruined earth to its destiny in the stars via Earthseed, her religion of Change. Rather than reject the roots of her past, Lauren shapes her father's religion and the diverse cultures of her Los Angeles childhood to create a new identity, a new self. Or, as she writes to her followers, "The Self must create/its own reasons for being//To shape God/Shape Self."

This sense of a shaped Self that articulates the past and future identities is also seen in Nnedi Okorafor's ***Binti (2015)***, whose female protagonist is the first of the Himba people to be accepted at the prestigious Oomza University. Yet as an outsider among the 'civilized' races of the universe, she must decide what it means to become someone new, without cutting her hair or denying her roots.

Finally, we come full circle in G. Willow Wilson's ***Ms. Marvel: No Normal (2014)***, a work that questions the shape of a woman's body when imagined in terms of male fantasy (such as a comic book superhero). Kamala Khan, a teenage Muslim from New Jersey, is gifted with superpowers and becomes Ms. Marvel, a woman whose very identity would defy her religion and her modesty in one fell swoop. Like Binti, she must learn to save herself before she saves the world, negotiating a body that respects her past while defining her future as a hero for teenage girls.

## FOR FURTHER READING

Butler, Octavia. *Wild Seed*

Cain, Chelsea. *Man-Eaters, Vols.1-3*

*The Future is Female! 25 Classic Science Fiction Stories by Women.* ed. Lisa Yaszek.

Jemisin, N.K. *How Long 'Til Black Future Month?*

-- *The Inheritance Trilogy*

Le Guin, Ursula. *The Dispossessed*

-- *The Lathe of Heaven*

Machado, Carmen Maria. *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories*

Okorafor, Nnedi. *Akata Witch*

Russ, Joana. *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*

Samatar, Sofia. *A Stranger in Olondria*

*Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology.* ed. Ann & Jeff Vandermeer

Tiptree, James (Alice Sheldon), *Her Smoke Rose Up Forever*

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