



Notion Of Gender In Science Fiction Films & Its Social Influences

Debabrata Hazra¹ & Dr. Barnali Chetia²

¹ Research Scholar, Dept. of Sciences & Humanities, Indian Institute of Information Technology Vadodara, India. Email: 201672002@iiitvadodara.ac.in

² Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sciences & Humanities, Indian Institute of Information Technology Vadodara, India. Email: barnali@iiitvadodara.ac.in

ABSTRACT:

Science fiction films, unlike sci-fi texts, are the ideal tools to discuss the future of humans, and they should also be used to re-evaluate the relationship between genders. This research paper analyzes the various changes in the depiction of male & female characters in science fiction films during their development. It also reveals the various feminism trends that emerged during this period. This study also discusses how sci-fi movies can help break the stereotype of women in scientific and academic fields and provide a positive image for women. Science fiction movies are made up of various elements such as surreal science and technology, and they combine these with well-known scientific ideas to create social backgrounds. Despite the call for more progressive ideas in sci-fi, there are still some stereotypes in the context of science fiction. For instance, many works still view women as the 'other.' Therefore, it is an attempt to evaluate gender representation in science fiction films.

Keywords: Science Fiction Films, Gender, Feminism, Women empowerment.

The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion (Haraway 149)

The science fiction genre has always offered an alternative view of gender identities and sexuality. This research examines how gender identities are conceptualized in sci-fi cinema and how it influences society's gender biases. Sohail Inayatullah argues that the critical post-structural approach to futures research focuses on the idea that alternative futures can make the present remarkable. The science fiction genre has

historically presented various alternative sex and gender models, and through these works, they have become a valuable tool for engaging with the ideas presented. (quoted in Milojevic & Inayatullah 129-130)

In 1977, Princess Leia Organa appeared like a goddess in the first Star War film. She is often considered a symbol of power, but she lacks the independent narrative value that she has become. Blade Runner was a science fiction film out in 1982. In the movie, technology and artificial intelligence create an artificial human being called a 'Replicant.' Various social issues were also addressed in the film. In the Blade Runner 2049 sequel, a new image of a perfect girlfriend was created, and it was revealed that the woman was a virtual projection of a male character.

Science fiction films are constantly shaping the social and professional status of women. Instead of using the traditional characterization of female characters, these films show women taking on leadership roles and competing against men in the workplace. Science fiction films have always tried to challenge the notions of gender and the limitations of female characters. In movies like Star Trek and Star Wars, the white heterosexual hero is typically portrayed in space exploration and conquest, but in other forms of masculinities and feminisms, which are of great importance to the future of humanity. The most striking opposition is between the familiar and the Alien. This opposition often consists of a cyborg, a mutant, or a computer. In alien invasion movies, male characters are often threatened and weakened by an 'other.' Otherness can be seen as an encompassing metaphor for social order, and it has been understood from various perspectives. The cyborg character has been in numerous films during the 1980s, and it often carries an implied gendered subtext.

Films that feature virtual reality also offer a variety of characters trapped in a world that is not real. Like the protagonists of The Matrix, these characters often suffer from identity crises as they are unable to identify reality from fiction. Aside from aliens, other metaphors of boundary-breaking include time travel, mutation, and the possibility of repeating certain events. Postmodern notions have also influenced how boundary-breaking is depicted in more recent films. In Tron: Legacy (2010), characters ultimately enter a program that becomes part of it. Quorra, the female hero, adopts traits typically associated with male heroism, representing an accomplished female warrior.

Science fiction can help deconstruct the sad reality of women's marginalization in today's society. It is also the genre that can be used to deconstruct the ideas about women's bodies that are being created by the tech world. Milojevic and Inayatullah

predict a future world where women will no longer be needed, and they believe that this world will be a woman-filled virtual world. Cyborgs have been featured in various films since the beginning of the 20th century. Their appearance can be interpreted as key figures in exploring new values. In these films, women and men are both creators and users of new technologies.

The binary model can be applied to any language, and it shows a tendency to polarize categories to make sense of the world. There are many possible ways to oppose it. The binary gender model has condemned the subordination of women in various discourses, and it places women as the other, which is considered alien or marginal. Science fiction can be considered a positive response to the binary system, and it proposes futures that are bound by various levels. Postmodernism has become the dominant theoretical vantage point for a science fiction film. It is characterized by the decentralization of hierarchies, allowing one term to privilege one group and marginalize the other. (quoted in Telotte 54).

This has prompted a general sense of insecurity and dissolution. Many science-fiction texts also evoke it. In postmodernism, the concept of the temporal past is often linked to the spatial past. Scott Bukatman shows how this concept can be analyzed through different approaches. Postmodernism is characterized by a temporalized pastiche and a spatial pastiche. Science fiction films have become more open to postmodern thought due to their emphasis on technology and their ability to stimulate the sense of reality. Films such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Inception* (2010) focus on the characters' inability to understand reality from fictional sources. In Jean Baudrillard's 1981 influential essay "Simulacra and Simulation," the character has three orders of simulacra. The first one refers to the universe as an imagined representation of it, while the second one refers to science fiction. Postmodern feminism proposes a new concept of gender identity based on plural notions of social identity. This concept argues that the term "gender" is unstable and troublesome. Rosi Braidotti shows how science fiction can help understand the complex cultural context and the importance of fantasy transformation. Space colonies, underground cities, and cities in flight have been the ideal sites for gender reflection.

Although gender is not always essential, it is still sometimes considered at the service of other notions of gender. For instance, in Hollywood films, the depiction of women is often at the service of normative gender. Instead of being constructed according to traditional patterns of representation, hegemonic times are contested

through multi-gendered spaces. Milojevic argues that the new sciences and the postmodern era have introduced new narratives. Science fiction films are known to offer significant gains in terms of both storytelling and innovation. In films like *Wall-E* (2008) and *Chappie* (2015), the body parts of humans are intermixed with technology at dangerous levels. This fusion between tech and society is not a typical postmodern device. The boundaries between technology and body are socially inscribed, and the scientific culture dissolved the boundaries between animals, humans, and machines during the twentieth century (quoted in Haraway 149-153).

The dissolution of boundaries brings about a positive image of the cyborg body as its condition transgresses gender dualism. The technological world liberates women's representations. Haraway envisioned a world where women were free to be themselves. Cyberfeminism is a field of study that focuses on gender and cybernetics. Its goal is to celebrate cyberspace as a realm of women's liberation. Many modern feminists agree that science fiction still offers a traditional view of gender, and women are still relegated to second-class status in future contexts. Even in the realm of cybernetics, where the blurring of borders is taken to an extreme, there are still gender inequalities. In films such as *Alien* (1979), it has been depicted as an evil alien that threatens to break with the dominant structures of society. The disruption of order in movies is often the result of the binary opposition system. In many cases, the male protagonist is the object of the cultural metaphor of the alien or monster.

In some of the films, the fear of female sexuality is often implied. For instance, in the case of the monster, the fear of sexual exploitation often stems from the *Alien*'s ability to reproduce. The *Alien* saga shows how alien women invading patriarchal power systems can create anxiety and dissatisfaction among the public. This anxiety is evidenced by the various representations of the *Alien* in the film series. In the *Alien* movies, men are threatened by alien invasions. As the movies develop, the fear of hybridization becomes more apparent. Also, the mechanisms and genes of hybrid organisms suggest that their identities are ambiguous.

Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) is a sci-fi addition to the feminist movement that tackles topics such as gender and patriarchal culture. *Ex Machina* sees women as beings who are sent from the stars to a strange land. Instead of being subjugated, they are viewed as objects of control. Nathan, the genius behind Google's search engine, is played by Oscar Isaac. At the start of *Ex Machina*, Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) learns that he won in a company raffle, and the true reason behind his visit

is clear. Nathan builds an artificial intelligence system that can think inside a body. His latest model is Ava, an android with striking features and synthetic skin. When Caleb sees how close she is to being human, he becomes a crush on her. The film is truly rich in character, with Ava's blank expressions giving her a Stepford quality.

In the film under discussion, Ava covers her robotic workings with her skin, and at the end, she snaps her naked body into the mirror. The moment is supposedly Ava's moment of liberation, as she removes her sisters and leaves them behind. Her liberation is contingent on her choosing to adopt the identity of her oppressors. Instead of accepting her hybrid identity, she rejects it and passes as a human in order to gain acceptance. *Ex Machina* is a subversive film that tackles the intersections of race, class, and gender in fictional female robots. A review of the film by the Huffington Post noted that while it is a smart movie, it is also rife with misogyny. Commenting on how easily robots can access the history of internet searches for all humans, the reviewer argued that it does not make sense that Ava would choose to present as female. The film is mainly focused on white women. It doesn't make light of the struggles of other marginalized women, and it doesn't hesitate to dismiss Kyoko despite her actions. (quoted in Wilson)

The difference between the alien movies and those based on other works is that Ellen Ripley has assumed the monstrous nature of the Alien. In other works, the Alien has been depicted as an opposition one-other. This new kind of Alien is not only alien but also human. There are hierarchies in spacefaring science fiction films like *Star Trek* (2009) and *Star Wars* (1977), where the patriarchal values are still intact. These films introduce heroes who are in search of mythical quests. At the same time, they are considered as powerful and dominant individuals, despite not showing any actual capabilities or abilities. This tendency to depict heroes as conquering men engages with social change. During the 1970s, the film industry experienced a backlash due to gender representation.

In this sense, movies like *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Dune* offer a unique take on traditional heroes. They show them as powerful and conservative rulers who enforce US conservative rules. Because of their ability to dominate space, conquering heroes are considered more superior to other Reaganite heroes who do not exhibit the same capabilities. They do not need to show off their muscled bodies in order to stand out. A more positive depiction in movies replaces the old fear of aliens. This shows that the Alien has been integrated into mainstream culture. The old fear of aliens is still parodied in contemporary movies, and the Alien has become

a marketing product. Its acceptance by society indicates that the US is gradually tolerating the non-gendered.

Various cultural anxieties emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, affecting how women and minorities were understood. This era also saw the appearance of the so-called New Man. Although it does not depict gendered robots, it has become a subject of discussion in scientific and academic circles. Far from being the hero who saves the girl, he is a terrifying robot who fears danger and is unable to rescue his lover. He exhibits extreme naivety and weak performances on many occasions.

These films are considered mere reflections of the contemporary crises of masculinity, and they should not be regarded as definitive works of men's studies. This device is often used in characters such as Dr. Frankenstein's monster or the clone Call in *Alien: Resurrection*. It also serves as a boundary buster in modern science fiction. Cyberspace is a realm of virtual characters that computer operators inhabit. This concept is considered as the third distinction of the cyborg type. The concept of genderless bodies has been depicted in various films and has been adapted to modern cultural needs.

Some films show characters entering cyberspace that has a pleasant experience. However, the difference between them and the other becomes less clear. The inability to distinguish the real and imaginary undermines the distinction between society's public and private spheres. This idea of dissolution and uncertainty is present in many films. In *The Matrix* (1999), the existence of an artificial world that is bound to dissolution adds to the idea of gender-bending. *The Matrix* is a fake world created by The Wachowskis, which is a simulation of the US at the ending of the 20th century. Gibson describes it as "a 3D chessboard extending to infinity" (Gibson 70). It shows how gender is ambiguous in a hyper-real environment.

Inception tackles the dangers of technology-controlled identities. The film shows how the mind can be manipulated using the latest technologies. Hayles' idea of the body as an interpenetrating system may be used to study how information patterns can be manipulated within the body. The film shows the various levels of characters' projections, and it suggests that the human body is gradually losing its private dimension. This idea of loss of its private image is then presented as an idea of the body is constantly re-invented and presented in complex ways (quoted in Martínez et al. 72).

Movies about biotechnology and the use of organic bodies for surrogate bodies have been showing up in recent years. According to the authors, the concept of cloning is an achievement within the scientific paradigm that men dominate. Films like *The Island* and *The Surrogates* have raised ethical concerns about altering genes for specific reasons, and they also create debate about the social consequences of this process. *The Surrogates* is a futuristic film about a world where humans live in solitary confinement and interact through surrogate bodies. While real humans are portrayed as unfit bodies, surrogates have been designed according to Western beauty standards (ibid 75).

The encounter with a difference is an important cultural and social debate that is reflected in many western science fiction films. The concept of boundary-breaking is often employed in science fiction films to alter the way gender is understood. Contemporary films still feature dominant gender roles, which are often met with cultural anxieties. Instead of depicting women as objects of desire, many films released during the turn of the millennium offer a different approach. Science fiction films break with the binarisms and construct a new reality.

Marianne Kac-Vergne argues that the very presence of female supporting characters in science fiction films is not representing women's power as expected. Instead, they help to present the male superpower, which again questions the entire notion of female representation in sci-fi films (Kac-Vergne 14). Science fiction films are often considered an alternative to binarisms, as they come up with new images of femininity and masculinity. The films mentioned in this paper show the demise of traditional gender patterns. However, these new representations of gender are not free of controversy. Science fiction has the potential to reflect on the need for more challenging depictions of women in popular culture. Through cultural phenomena, such as the rise of women, science fiction films can still improve the representation of female characters. A haven full of counter-stereotypical images of women making attempts to claim their fair share.

Works Cited:

Gibson, W. *Neuromancer*. Ace Books. New York. 1984. Print.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." 1985. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1991. Print.

- Kac-Vergne, Marianne. "Sidelining Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction Film." *Miranda*, no. 12, 2016, doi:10.4000/miranda.8642. Web. Accessed on 11. Jan. 2020
- Martínez López, Francisco & Garcia Ordaz, Mercedes & Rocio, Carrasco. Science Fiction and Bodies of the Future: Alternative Gender Realities in Hollywood Cinema. *Journal of Futures Studies*. 2015. 20. 67-80. 10.6531/JFS.2015.20(2). A67.
- Milojevic, I., & Sohail Inayatullah. *Feminist Critiques and Visions of the Future*. *Futures Research Quarterly*, 14(1), 35-46. 2010. Print.
- Telotte, J. P. *Science Fiction Film*. Cambridge University Press. Port Chester. 2001. Print.
- Wilson, Natalie. "How Ex Machina Fails to Be Radical." *Ms. Magazine*, 16 July 2018, msmagazine.com/2015/04/29/how-ex-machina-fails-to-be-radical/. Web. Accessed on 10. Jan. 2020