
UNIT 3 SCIENCE FICTION: AN INTRODUCTION

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This introductory unit seeks to provide a brief outline and a historical overview to the literary phenomena called Science Fiction. We will delineate the important discussions pertaining to its definition, generic understanding, methods of reading and its evolving social status over the years. We will also chart the history of its evolution; enumerate the major types of science fiction that has emerged over the years; and discuss the major criticisms and debates/themes that have proliferated around it. The definitions, criticisms and types mentioned here have been drawn from an Anglo-American perspective. Let's begin our journey into Science Fiction.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The first thing that we need to keep in mind is that, though science fiction (SF) is commonly thought to be of Western origin; over the years, science fiction has been appropriated, consumed and acknowledged by all cultures. From India to China, to Japan, to Russia, to Latin American and to African countries, SF has emerged as a viable medium to represent, subvert and challenge the accepted models of reality, history and identity. So what do we do now? Let us begin with trying to define SF? How do we define the genre of SF? How do we read SF? And what is the present social status of SF?

Our contemporary age has often been postulated as being nothing less than a science fiction with the development of new modes of technologies,

communications, and multifarious forms of digital simulation. As a literary product widely categorised as central to one's culture, the history of science fiction's rise as a ubiquitous and fundamental aspect of society that has undergone several stages and transformations. From its early description as a low-brow aesthetic product described pejoratively as trash, pulp and read not by critics or scholars but by 'fans', suffering from what **Brian Baker** terms as "crisis of legitimisation", SF criticism and scholarship (science fiction and its acronym SF will be used interchangeably throughout this unit) have evolved since the late 1960s in America and Britain as a legitimate area of study. In fact, earlier the novels like **George Orwell's** *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), **Thomas Pynchon's** *Gravity Rainbow* (1973), **Margaret Atwood's** *The Handmaid's Tale* (1984), as **Mark Bould** in his introduction to *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* (2009) describes, have often been interpreted as "not really SF" but, rather as "transcending the genre" itself (1). The vulgar form of science fiction understood earlier as mainly a publishing gimmick has given way to an understanding as, novelist **Thomas M Disch**, who declared in 1998: "science fiction has come to permeate our culture in ways both - trivial and/or profound, obvious and/or insidious."

Science fiction's urge to be assimilated within the mainstream canon, as **Roger Luckhurst** explains in his well-known essay "The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic" (1994), "seeks to elaborate a fantasy of non-origin, of being indistinguishable, identical, to the 'mainstream': in such narratives of embedding SF into a larger historical unfolding there is clearly a desire to return to an earlier state of things, before the genre divide, before the boundary of high and low." So, the different trends and thematic concerns over the years as it has developed in science fiction texts or criticism are really just an account that acknowledges this literary product as Luckhurst suggested, "apply[ing] for citizenship in literature" (38). **Joanna Russ** in her essay "Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction" (1975) locates science fiction as a type of literature (prose literature) that includes many structural elements similar to other kinds of prose fiction and inclusive of an aesthetic sense and value. But, more importantly Russ underlines that the way to read science fiction calls for different cognitive skills and evaluative criteria than so-called mainstream literature. So, how does one read SF? Let's try and understand that next. Borrowing from Russ' and Luckhurst's accounts of SF, the tensions, the dialogues, the dissents and the arguments within the terrain of science fiction can be read as offering interesting insights on the economic, political, cultural and social governance of imperial and neo-imperial politics as it pans out within the colonial/postcolonial/global arena. Science fiction, then, is a polemical and social terrain encapsulating multiple perspectives pertaining to social variables like gender, race, class, sexuality and technology that constitutes our society. Having said that, what needs to be remembered is that the arena of SF is not only vast but also in a state of flux, as is obvious from its constant fascination with reinventing itself either through new modes of narrative strategies or by using thematic content differently to represent a code, as **Gary Westfahl** in his book *Science Fiction, Children's Literature, and Popular Culture: Coming of Age in Fantasyland* posits, "challenge old beliefs and construct new paradigms." Defining or re-defining the genre is the next stage of our journey into the world of SF.

3.2 TOWARDS A USEFUL DEFINITION OF SCIENCE FICTION: REDEFINING THE GENRE

In the analysis of Russ and Luckhurst, we find that SF demands a different reading than say the type of reading required by realist literatures; and in the evolution of SF, we see that it requires the blurring of the boundaries between canonical literatures and mass literatures. So, what we find is that, the function and nature of SF is at the same time, similar to and different from mainstream literatures. It therefore, allows us to envisage SF as a contradictory terrain forever in confrontation with the theoretical pretensions of canonical literature. The terrain of science fiction is riddled with problems because of its contrary origins and theorisation. Science fiction is a literature that defies explanation as its multiple characteristics, tropes and ever changing landscapes are an inescapable fact of its mutable identity. To document the protean character of SF, one needs to move away from a single comprehensive explanation of SF, because as **David Seed** rightly asserts, “to reduce these explanations to a single, comprehensive definition [is the] way madness lies.” However, this hasn’t stopped critics and scholars from trying to define this varied and mind boggling body of literature. And over the years, there have been several attempts to elucidate this literary product by providing a working definition either through market dynamics or its social impact or its theme or setting. The definitions of what constitutes SF are plenty but, there is no consensus regarding its nature and this lack of agreement has a bearing on its social value. Regardless of the numerous definitions that proliferate the terrain of SF it should be kept in mind that defining science fiction is, as **Brian Baker** asserts, “not a neutral activity.” The very process of definition is marked by a sense of boundary which excludes and includes certain paradigms and in effect, demonstrates a certain conception of SF’s social role.

Critics like **Norman Spinrad** (qtd. in Clute and Nicholls: 314) argue that science fiction is something which is marketed and published as science fiction. So, science fiction for them is a literature that most readers claim to understand by the covers of the text itself with its glossy designs of aliens, spaceships, robots. However, this explanation fails to reflect on the varying themes and tropes that have emerged within this genre. For **Brian Aldiss**, the well-known British science fiction writer and critic, science fiction “is a search for the definition of man and [points towards] his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge.” While at once philosophical, this explanation of Aldiss points towards the social, psychological truth that constitutes mankind and the veracity of available knowledge systems. Aldiss’ definition suggests the close affinity of SF with the very existential knowledge that constitutes humanity. For **Ursula K Le Guin**, (whom we will be studying in the next unit), SF is a “modern myth”, while **Fredric Jameson** terms it as “a representation of the future” and **Robert Scholes** and **Eric Rabkin** terms SF as “modern conscience.” All these definitions allow us to read science fiction as being closely connected with society, history, identity and as fundamental to human existence.

Then again critics like **Darko Suvin** (1979), **Carl D Malmgren** (1991) and **Adam Roberts** (2006) argue that the term science fiction itself is contradictory as it is built using an oxymoron - ‘science’ and ‘fiction’ critics. SF can be understood as a study that enables a fantastical elaboration of science or fictional

narrative about science and its impact on society. In almost all illustrations of SF, both of these definitions hold to elaborate on the diverse elements of our society.

The earliest understanding of SF locates its origin and nature in relation to other pre-existing generic types. In the early stages of its growth, science fiction was read primarily as an instance of fantastic literature. **Tzvetan Todorov**, in his *A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), defined the fantastic through three modes – the Marvellous, the Uncanny and the Fantastic. Todorov's description of the fantastic provided the base for further theorisation on that in-between space between science and fiction. He states the fantastic as, “an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us [. . .] The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). **Rosemary Jackson** in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981), reads fantasy “as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the novel's closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures . . .” (25). Jackson's and Todorov's explanation of the fantastic allows us to revisit the science aspect of this terminology in a more nuanced manner. Todorov's hesitation between the real and unreal, the actual and the possible, makes science fiction a dynamic terrain. **Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr**, identifies this “oxymoronic fusion of the rational and marvellous” as that which enables science fiction “to challenge received notions of reality - sometimes seriously, sometimes playfully” (“Criticism” 43). This elaboration of science fiction's contradictory and opposing perspectives to “challenge” is described by Jackson's premise of fantastic as the ‘other’ side of realism, one which leads to a re-conceptualisation of reality itself. This finds its most famous explanation in Darko Suvin's description of science fiction:

a literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the *presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.*

(Emphasis in the original; 37)

Suvin's description entails a balance between the cognitive and the estrangement equation as, **Eric D Smith** has rightly pointed out, “[a]n overbalancing or neutralizing of this dialectical tension in favor of cognition results in the mundane familiarities of an aesthetic ‘realism,’ while one in favor of a mere estrangement not cognitively tethered to the present (and thus not critically charged) yields the irrationalist projections of purely generic ‘fantasy’” (3). Suvin's explanation of SF as “cognitive estrangement” allows a critical examination of the familiar, everyday reality by looking at it through the lens of defamiliarisation. Science fiction in Suvin's discussion traverses the sameness of quotidian life and the unfamiliar radical alterity of a strange other through the use of the ‘novum’ to disrupt the bourgeois, capitalist status quo. In course of time, certain motifs, tropes, images like that of aliens, artificial intelligence, space travel, time travel, new-fangled technological innovations have all become entrenched as “megatexts,” a term coined by **Damien Broderick** (57-9). However, even though certain tropes, elements or ‘megatexts’ or novums are common characteristics which have become codified and institutionalised as generic features of science fiction, this explanation of SF is still largely unsatisfactory. So, the question is can we really define science fiction in a simple manner? Think about it. The next

aspect of Science Fiction that we need to look at is whether it's a genre of literature or whether it's a mode of writing within literature?

3.2.1 Genre or Mode

In this sub-section, we shall look at how Science fiction can be recognised as a genre. For this to happen, it requires that the texts move within its generic boundaries, but this does not really happen. As **Farah Mendlesohn** claims, science fiction texts are less a “genre” and more a “mode” of writing. Unlike other literary genres, science fiction is more an “ongoing discussion” (Mendlesohn) which borrows and sources from any available genres like romances, horror, mystery, and thrillers. **John Reider** in his essay titled “Defining SF, or Not” argues for an accretion of repetitions, echoes, imitations, allusions, identifications, and distinctions” (196) whose meaning differs in terms of its socio-historical context. **Sherryl Vint** rightly suggests that science fiction “is not a ‘thing’ but is always actively being made from heterogeneous materials, and larger questions of market, cultural politics, and aesthetics inform these struggles over definition” (13-4). While science fiction might be the object of critical theory, **Carl Freedman** asserts, that critical theory is at the same time explained by science fiction. Freedman’s analysis of SF and dialectical thinking as accounts of each other allowed it to traverse beyond the rigid generic boundaries as formulated by Suvin. Freedman espouses that generic identification of this literary phenomenon fails to take into regard the technical virtuosity of this cultural product. To sum up, the myriad definitions and generic slippages of this varied literature, encompasses a whole history of literary canonical frameworks and revisions. Labelled pejoratively as vulgar, mass-marketed initiative lacking emotional depth, comprising of melodramatic plots and stereotypical characters, its later rise as literature to redefine boundaries of the real and unreal, actual and possible, human and non-human, male and female, enabled the readers to not only redraw the present historical and political scenario but also, to envisage our future in a new light. In the words of **Andy Sawyer** and **Peter Wright**, “[science fictions’] speculative nature, its incessant philosophizing on ‘what if?’ invites a comparative speculative response; it requires engagement with thought-experiments that confront and often overturn passive acceptance of contemporary conditions; it has the capacity to stimulate, to unsettle, to provoke the reader into an intellectual response. Constantly reinventing itself to react imaginatively to transformations in its cultural and ideological milieu, it remains the most vibrant of the popular genres and affords considerable scholarly pleasure to those involved in its teaching and study”.

In the next section we shall enumerate a brief history of this genre. This historical mapping is merely a means to explicate certain key linkages of this ever-shifting and fluctuating genre with other literary genres as well as enables us to read through this outline certain elements and tropes that continue to sustain in the field of SF till this date. However, considering the contradictory nature of this terrain and its mutable nature as seen in the plethora of definitions provided by critics over the years, one needs to keep in mind that the historical lineage of SF is also, devoid of a clear agreement between scholars.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How would you define science fiction? Is it a genre or one which surmounts generic understanding?

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3.3 A SHORT HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION

Adam Roberts in *The History of Science Fiction* (2006) locates the beginning of science fiction in the ancient Greek novel of *travel extraordinaires*. Moving on from the instances of travel, science, and adventure woven in Greek novels, Roberts interrogates the disappearance of this mode for about two thousand years and its next major appearance in 16th century Europe. His reading of this disappearance, presence, and re-emergence of science fiction leads to his assessment of this mode as the movement from Catholicism to that of the birth of Protestantism. As a “function of western Protestant culture” (x), SF grew

“as an imaginatively expansive and (crucially) *materialist* mode of literature, as opposed to the magical-fantastic, fundamentally religious mode that comes to be known as Fantasy” (x).

Sawyer and Wright add that science fiction’s emergence can be seen as corollary to the rise of the utopian genre. **Thomas More**’s *Utopia* (1516), the first utopian literary text was an illustration of man’s rational energies to actualise a better world. So, alongside the rise of humanism and in the wake of Reformist energies to develop scientific temperament, a new discourse of scientific rationalism took precedence. However, the birth of modern science fiction or SF proper as we know it arose out of the twin movement of industrialism and imperialism; a corollary to the rapid developments in the sphere of science and technology. **Brian W Aldiss** and **David Wingrove**’s history of SF titled *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (1988) locates the origins of SF in the changing atmosphere of an Industrial revolution which led to the birth of Gothic fiction. For Aldiss and Wingrove, the genre of gothic and **Mary Shelley**’s *Frankenstein* (1818) remains the original text out of which the mode of science fiction has emerged. Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a novel showing man creating life using pseudo-scientific methods has generated a whole new way of genetically modifying species, foods (Frankenstein Food), discourses related to the reproduction of artificial life. The novel has also, created new possibilities for rethinking the ethical constraints of man vis-a- vis the power to wield scientific knowledge. If the 19th century saw the indomitable rise of science and technology as influencing social, political and imperial regimes, it also, undermined social and religious certainties. Against this backdrop, one can read the importance of H G Wells scientific romances. Whether it’s the *Time Machine* (1895) and/or *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Wells “provided,” in the words of **Paul Kincaid**, “a vocabulary of images and devices that would set the tone for Anglophone science fiction thereafter”.

In his book *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), **John Reider** argues that colonialism is science fiction “genre’s texture, a persistent, important component of its displaced references to history, its engagement in ideological production, and its construction of the possible and the imaginable” (15). In the same vein, **Patricia Kerslake** posits that the main subject matter of SF is “the theme of empire” (191). As a product of the “techno scientific Empire” (Csicsery - Ronay Jr “Dis-Imagined” 231), this theme of science fiction makes the rise and growth of SF so significant within the Indian/African/Latin American context.

If the First and Second World Wars saw Britain losing its status as a global imperial power, America, by contrast, emerged as the new, economic world power. The period of British SF during the World Wars is one that seeks to encounter the devastating violence through catastrophes like **Aldous Huxley**’s *Brave New World* (1932) – a proto-science fiction and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty –Four* (1949). These texts were not science fiction as Suvin categorised it but, did build up on the tropes and themes of science and technology as it impacted our everyday life. America on the other hand, saw itself at the centre of shaping the future through its manipulation, control and surveillance of scientific and technological knowledge. And against the rapid scientific developments that led America to its super power status, **Hugo Gernsback** first started his science fiction magazine, published in cheap periodicals like *Amazing Stories*, Gernsback’s ‘scientification’ magazine related a didactic story of miraculous future technology that propels America to its global supremacy. Hugo’s pulp magazines generated a huge interest among young adult male readers who comprised mainly its fandom. From these early fandoms emerged the leading science fiction practitioners like **Isaac Asimov**, **Robert Heinlein** and others who shaped and fashioned nascent genre of SF. By the 1930s, Gernsback’s pulp magazines gave way to other magazines and the most dominant of them all being *Astounding Stories*. Led by its editor, **John W Campbell Jr.**, the magazine was soon retitled - *Astounding Science Fiction* and it emerged as the main site for casting narratives in strict adherence to scientific laws but without losing grips over character development and moral equilibrium. The 1960’s saw the re-emergence of British SF with **Michael Moorcock** as the editor of the magazine *New Worlds*. Moorcock’s editorship inaugurated the New Wave SF that in conjunction with literary modernism and counterculture movement challenged the brash certainties of American science fiction. This was followed soon after by a fresh wave of experimentation in American science fiction that primarily questioned the boundaries of sexuality and desire. Both the British and American science fiction interrogated norms of patriarchal society and subverted the claims of the establishment to articulate the concerns of the underprivileged of history. If Ursula K Le Guin confronted gender hierarchies that existed in our society in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969); in *The Dispossessed* (1974) she questioned the problematic status of utopia itself.

Associated to this sequence of events which gave rise to modern science fiction is Adam Roberts’ broad delineation of three types of science fiction: firstly, space travel science fiction (to other planets, strange new climes); secondly, time travel science fiction (both to past or to future) and thirdly, technology-oriented science fiction (a form most dominant in the 20th century). Apart from these three major types, Roberts also counts the utopian form as a larger frame to many different types of SF. In accordance with these categorisations, the development of science fiction has been approached through multiple markers like Hard Science,

Magazine-era SF, New Wave and Cyberpunk SF, science fiction from the 1980s to the present times. The 1980s saw a new engagement with the Hard SF of Campbell with the British new wave experimentation that resulted in vivid portrayals of technologised society. The cyberpunk novels inaugurated by **William Gibson** in *Neuromancer* (1984) were a brilliant portrayal of the digitalised world that comprises our contemporary society. By the 1990s, SF became predominantly a means to redefine our postmodern and postcolonial world of hybridity and in-betweenness that marks the liminal existence of man within the globalised world.

Over the years, the various trends and historical developments of this genre can also be understood as part of a larger design to frame the common ethos and framework of this mutable literary genre. In its rise and fall, we see the rise and fall of empires, the questioning of gender and racial attitudes, disrupting gender and sexual orientation as natural and biological in nature, in making ecological crisis as a veritable fact and thus, to change our economic policies. The historical trends of SF have also resulted in several types of SF which has mutated and proliferated in corollary with our historical and political contexts. Let us examine the typology of Science Fiction next.

3.4 A TYPOLOGY OF SCIENCE FICTION

The different kinds of SF that are listed below are the most popular types of this challenging genre. However, within these types, there are several sub-types that have proliferated into a highly marketable literary artefact. The common types as much as it reflects on the changing trends within this terrain also, document the social transformations that have been wrought by the forces of technology and scientific epistemology. There are three significant types of SF – Hard SF, New Wave, Cyberpunk, and Utopian/Dystopian SF.

3.4.1 Hard Science Fiction

Hard Science fictions displayed a heightened association with science and is largely concerned, as **G Hartwell** asserts with, “the emotional experience of describing and confronting what is scientifically true”. The rise of science fiction as a haven for marketing and publishing gimmicks started largely during 1926-1960, effectively denominated as Magazine-era SF. This era not only established American science fiction as the most popular and entertaining in the global science fiction publishing industry but also, as **Brian Atterbury** asserts “exerted considerable influence on SF’s form and subject matter”, particularly on the mediation of science to reshape humanity. The major thematic concern of Hard science fiction was to “display a heightened connection to science” (**Westfahl**) and to educate the masses on the significance of science to everyday life. The two prominent writers of this type were **Arthur C Clarke** and **Hans Clement**. The writing of hard science fiction was both clinical and clumsy and concerned majorly with scientific knowledge to travel to other spaces rather than to reflect on the immediate social reality. It should be noted that Hard SF is not to be understood in monolithic terms suggesting an oppositional stance to a Soft SF. The texts construed under Hard SF are numerous and diverse in their range and themes with only an implied emphasis on the soundness of scientific ideas. Clement’s “Fireproof” (1947) deals with the possibility of the survival of fire under weightless conditions and Clarke’s “Hide and Seek” (1949) is about a man outmanoeuvring a spaceship while running on the surface of a Martian Moon.

This serious attention to pseudo-scientific terminologies of the day is amply encapsulated in **Heinlein**'s movie *Destination Moon* (1950), a movie helmed at the backdrop of the establishment of the US Space program. Despite its wide appeal among the masses, it was the New Wave SF that reshaped and redefined this literary genre.

3.4.2 New Wave

According to Moorcock (1979), New Wave SF with its boring and pessimistic plotlines, “ushered SF into the realms of serious literature” (qtd. in Latham: 202). Without losing its concern for scientific epistemology, New Wave SF sought to reflect on the issues most significant for modern society. Termed both elitist (**Spinrad** 1990) and as deeply connected with strands of popular culture, New Wave SF brought in a wave of experimentation and innovation for a literary product restrained by pseudo-scientific thought experiments. The writers and critics most associated with this SF (**Judith Merrill**, Moorcock) questioned “the format and ideology of traditional SF plotlines” of pulp fiction and sought to move beyond the space exploration stories of Golden Age fictions (Hard SF of 1950s) “to the creation of new states of mind, new states of awareness” (Latham 2011, 117). Writers experimented with both form and content of SF and capitalised on the youth counterculture of the 1960s, anti-war activism, second wave feminism and ecological crisis; themes of alternative gender politics, rejection of the traditional white, male subject of the pulp fictions, interrogations of power networks and configurations in every form and variable of society redefined the shape of SF itself. **Ballard**'s *The Cage of Sand* (1962) sought to represent the cosmic voyagers as troubled, anti-heroes, locked up in their own inner demons rather than representing them in the manner of Hard SF as brave imperialists striding forward on the wave of science and technology. **Latham** believed that New Wave SF expanded the themes of SF and it boosted its stylistic range (in Seed, 214). In the next sub-section, we shall look at what utopia is.

3.4.3 Utopia

Utopian literature and SF are inextricably linked as Darko Suvin pointed out with its core impulse of cognitive estrangement. Defining the Utopian form as “the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where socio-political institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” (1979; 49). Suvin's description of Utopian genre as materialist makes it remarkably similar to later SF concerned with the “larger collective social and cultural machinery – socio political institutions, norms, and relationships – rather than individual characters or character psychology”

This creation of a new space, new world, newer environment with the help of ‘novum’ extrapolated from the world the reader/author inhabits alternatively serves as an analogy for the real, experiential world and connects SF with the utopian genre. Using Suvin's theory of “cognitive estrangement,” Fredric Jameson explains that the utopian genre is constructed around the here and the now and thus, “defamiliarize (s) and restructure(s) our experience of our own present” (286). **Tom Moylon** in his book titled *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (1986) draws upon Jameson's exposition on the

connections between science fiction and utopian vision. For Moylon, utopian text “resists the closure of ideology” (18) and is oppositional to the formations and structures of ideology. Introducing the influential term of ‘critical utopias’, Moylon describes it as one in which the texts “reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream” (36) wherein through the broken narrative strategies employed within the text, the ideological structures are dismantled. For Moylon, critical utopias as a textual space emerge as the key impulse “to open up a radical path to a not yet realized future” (50). Utopia informs both the structure and the theme of SF and the historical context out of which it emerges. Through its use of the notion of defamiliarization, Utopian SF makes the readers critically aware of the “problems of the reigning social order” and deconstructs the commonly accepted beliefs and conventions of the society leading it open to change and transformations (Wegner 80). Cyberpunk is a latter type of science fiction that also needs to be looked at.

3.4.4 Cyberpunk

The 1980s recorded a new dimension in the field of science fiction which emerged from the sterility of its earlier subject-matter and old styles. This was the emergence of the form of ‘Cyberpunk,’ a term coined by **Bruce Bethke** and represented most famously in **William Gibson’s** *Neuromancer* (1984). In the words of **John Clute**, “cyberpunk did not domesticate the future. It treated the future as a god.” (68) A slightly edgy artistic and cultural label, Cyberpunk is also a commercial label concerned primarily with computers and the relationship between technology and the body. **Mark Bould** suggests that Cyberpunk has spawned several versions like *cowpunk*, *steampunk*, *biopunk* and others. Derived from a combination of cyber which relates to communication networks and punk that is concerned with marginality, youthfulness, hooliganism, cyberpunk is SF that is anti-authoritarian, filled with “socially excluded, characters living in the ruins and in the shadows of multinational capital” (Bould 218). The best example of Cyberpunk is Gibson’s *Neuromancer* – a fiction that cannibalises the styles of the past, in which the Eurocentric binaries of natural and artificial no longer holds value. In the words of Bould, “*Neuromancer* inaugurated the SF of multinational capital and corporate globalization, its depiction of information circulating in cyberspace a potent metaphor for the global circulation of capital” (220). Cyberpunk inaugurated a new field of thought where the tendencies of global capital and postmodern eclectic styles are registered to rupture the outmoded forms of thought and expression. Let us now look at the themes that are taken up in science fiction.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the various types of science fiction writings that have emerged within the terrain of SF.

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3.5 THEMES

We now come to the themes, debates that have greatly expanded the canon of Science Fiction. Most of these play out within the larger framework of theorisations like marxism, postmodernism, feminisation, and ecological. Without going into the intricate details of these themes, I would like to introduce the basic concepts that have proliferated around these theoretical debates.

From the 1960s, Marxist criticism vastly influenced the writings and understanding of science fiction. Particularly, Utopian SF and its derivatives like dystopian, utopian, have flourished in its close affinities with Marxist terminologies. Concerned as Utopian SF is, with providing alternatives to current social and political regime and identifying with the possibility of change, the themes so developed in its connection with Marxism is related to a “critique of contemporary conditions or possible future outcomes of current social trends” (Csicsery Ronay Jr., 113). The desire to bring forth a change amidst a world filled with despair, exploitation, sexual violence, economic constraints fuels both the utopian and dystopian SF fuelled by Marxist imagination.

From its Marxist underpinnings as elaborated in Darko Suvin’s classification, science fiction criticism moved towards feminist fabulation. Science fiction as a genre has typically been understood as a white, male-dominated genre. In the wake of Marxists analysis and the subtext of technological implosion, critics like **Donna Haraway** and **N Katherine Hayles** identify SF as concerned with the consequences of technology on individual lives. As Donna Haraway explains, “science fiction is generally concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others and with the exploration of possible worlds in a context structured by transnational technoscience” (300). Apart from SF criticism’s newer perspectives like feminism and cybernetics, recent studies have focused on science fiction’s close connection with postmodernism. If postmodernity suggests the hybridised way of being, random, chaotic nature of existence at once plural and meaningless, it has led SF terrain to refashion itself in newer ways to represent and transform reality. The postmodernist debates allowed us to understand the relationship better between science fiction and socio cultural moment (Hollinger 237). Hollinger posits that “Cyberpunk’s stories about the implosions of organic nature and inorganic technology imagine processes of denaturalization in which “the human” is *literally* transformed into the posthuman” (237).

3.6 LET US SUM UP

The various new theories/debates around SF reflects the growth of science fiction from its humble beginnings as adventure and escapist literature to a mode concerned with the postulation of man in relation to society. This brief overview reads science fiction from its definition, modes of reading; its social value; generic location within the literary canon; its historical mapping; kinds of SF and the themes that have been extremely popular and in fact, shaped the canon itself. So essentially what we’ve tried to do in this introductory unit is to try and define what science fiction is; we have examined it as a genre and traced the evolution of science fiction as a genre. We hope you now have some understanding of this genre and its various forms.

3.76 QUESTIONS

- 1) Explain the literary status of science fiction and how has that led to an evolution within the field of SF itself.
- 2) Elaborate on Marxist underpinnings of SF.
- 3) Discuss Feminist fabulation and how it has reshaped the canon of SF.
- 4) Elaborate the relationship between Cyberpunk and postmodernist thought.
- 5) Discuss the origins of SF and what impact does it have on the themes of SF.

3.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read sections 3.2 & 3.2.1 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read sections 3.4, 3.4.1, 3.4.2, 3.4.3 & 3.4.4 carefully and then write the answer in your own words.

3.9 SUGGESTED READINGS & REFERENCES

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