

The Women of Cyberpunk

The Cyberpunk Project

Women have always been on the fringes of the science fiction writing community. Not only have there been few female writers, but few female characters of substance have explored the universe, battled aliens, or discovered new technologies. Even in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), considered by some to be the first science fiction novel, Elizabeth, who is the major female character, does little more than decorate Victor's arm, snag his heart, and eventually contribute to his self-destruction. Women were virtually non-existent in the Golden Age SF (1938-1949) writings; except perhaps as trophies to be rescued, or smoldering, sexual beings that really didn't contribute to the overall plot other than as the hero's love interest. However, the female characters of cyberpunk are not damsels in distress; nor are they the mother earth goddesses or cyborgs of the feminist SF writings of the '70's. These characters are not quite the equals of their male counterparts; and in some cases, objectification is still blatant. But in general, there is twisting of traditional gender and sexual roles in cyberpunk writing that helps set it apart from previous SF. Two characters that particularly embody these radical differences are Molly Millions of Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Johnny Mnemonic and Lizzie from Tom Maddox's *Snake Eyes*.

Molly is not sexual trophy for Case (*Neuromancer*) and Johnny (*Johnny Mnemonic*). She is their bodyguard. Because of this, Molly often instigates violence while the male lead character essentially stands by and watches. This is a major transgression of a role traditionally assumed by men in previous eras of SF. Molly doesn't need the protection and safety that men traditionally supplied to women; instead she is the one who is protecting Case and Johnny. This scenario is witnessed by Johnny, in *Johnny Mnemonic* :

"I'm not sure this profiles as good business", the pirate said, angling for better money. "Target specs on a combat that isn't in the book---"

"Waste my time and you won't profile at all", said Molly, leaning across his scarred plastic desk to prod him with her forefinger.

"So maybe you want to buy your microwaves somewhere else ?" He was a tough kid, behind his Mao-job. A Nighttowner by birth, probably.

Her hand blurred down the front of his jacket, completely severing the lapel without rumpling the fabric.

"So we got a deal or what ?"

"Deal", he said, staring at his ruined lapel with what he must have hoped was only polite interest.

"Deal." (Gibson, 38)

In the above passage, it is evident that Molly, however, would not have the ability to truly break away from the female SF character stereotype without her body's enhancements. She is the more physically powerful because of them. Technically, she could be considered a cyborg in feminist and technological theorist Donna Haraway's view because of these enhancements :

"Chiba. Yeah. See, Molly's been to Chiba, too." And she showed me her hands, fingers slightly spread. Her fingers were slender, tapered, very white against the polished burgundy nails. Ten

blades snicked straight out from their recesses beneath her nails, each one a narrow, double edged scalpel in pale blue steel. (Gibson 37)

and,

And I saw for the first time that the mirrored lenses were surgical inlays, the silver rising smoothly from her high cheekbones sealing her eyes in their sockets. (Gibson, 36)

However, she is far removed from the feminist utopian universes that Haraway seeks to define by using feminist writings. Molly is of a hard SF dystopian milieu that presents a bleak future where there is a massive chasm between rich and poor and every aspect of life is controlled by technology; whereas "the ... fantasy fiction by women depicts a closer connection between nature and culture... These societies celebrate the natural cycles in their institutions and ritual" (Ben-Tov, 138). Also, in these worlds, mechanical augmentation of the body is seen as alienating towards a woman's erotic desires (Ben-Tov, 160). This is not the case with Molly, as she is the one who initiates the first sexual encounter with Case in *Neuromancer*, in yet another transgression of generally accepted gender roles. Typically women who are this sexually powerful are portrayed as villains. This is not the case with Molly, as she is clearly portrayed an ancillary protagonist alongside the male lead.

Similarly, in Tom Maddox's short story, *Snake Eyes*, many of the same attributes that set Molly apart are exemplified in the character of Lizzie. She is portrayed as having more sexual and physical power, as well as overall knowledge about the situation. She has been on the space station working with Charley Hughes, the head of the Aleph project for some time. Lizzie is completely aware George's probable fate with the project, and is basically instructed to seduce him :

Charley Hughes looked for Lizzie, who had disappeared for the moment. She came back and said, "Where's George ?"

"Drunk, gone to bed."

"Too bad. We were just getting to know each other."

"So I saw. How do you feel about doing this ?"

"You mean do I feel like a lying, traitorous bitch ?"

"Come on Lizzie, we're all in this together."

"Well, don't ask such dumb questions. I feel bad, sure, but I know what George doesn't --- so I'm ready to do what must be done. And by the way, I really do like him."

Charley said nothing. He thought, yes, just as Aleph said you would. (Maddox, 19)

In addition, is she who trains George to spacewalk; and it is she who is the catalyst in their sexual encounters. For example, when they first meet :

At the door, George met a tall woman who said, "Welcome, George. I'm Lizzie. Charley Hughes told me you'd be here"... Like George, she had shining cable junctions beneath her jaw. She kissed him with her tongue in his mouth.

"Are you the recruiting officer ?" George asked. "If so, good job." (Maddox, 18)

Lizzie is far from being an objectified trophy for George, instead it is he, who is in a sense her trophy.

These female characters, and others in cyberpunk have helped make the idea of contorted gender and sexual roles central in defining the movement. However, that does not mean that the objectified woman is not seen in cyberpunk. While Molly stands out as a truly original and well-developed character in Gibson's work, Linda Lee, Case's first girlfriend in *Neuromancer*, is essentially a flat and stereotypical "damsel in distress". Despite the fact that Pat Cardigan's story *Rock On* is told from Gina's point of view; in the end, she is not allowed to be independent of her "boyfriend" Man-O-War. However, a majority of the female characters have helped cyberpunk become the first SF movement that has portrayed women as strong and dynamic.

Works Cited

Aldiss, Brian W., and David Wingrove. *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*. New York : Avon Books, 1986.

Ben-Tov, Sharona. *The Artificial Paradise: Science Fiction and American Reality*. Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Gibson, William. "Johnny Mnemonic". *Writing About Cyberpunk*. Ed. Tonya Browning. The University of Texas at Austin, Fall 1995.

Maddox, Tom. "Snake Eyes". *Mirrorshades : The Cyberpunk Anthology*. Ed. Bruce Sterling. New York : Ace Books, 1986. pp. 12-33.