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### Feminist Fabulation as a Metafictional Enterprise

The fact that feminist speculative fiction (FSF) still resides outside the canon is one problem on which both science fiction and feminist theorists agree.

Helen Merrick explains that the “conjunction of feminism and science fiction (SF) is one which continues to evince surprise and even amusement from many feminists and academics. This despite the 30-year history of the ‘sub-genre’ of feminist SF, and postmodern analyses that celebrate SF as the exemplary literature of our late twentieth-century techno-culture” [7].

Marleen Barr, one of the foremost critics of FSF, suggests that the way to gain acceptance from the canon is to distance FSF from its science fiction roots by focusing instead on its postmodern aspects. In *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory* (1987) [2] she coins the term ‘feminist fabulation’ (FF) to name what she identifies as a new, postmodern “supergenre of women’s writing ...which includes works now thought of as mainstream, SF, fantasy, supernatural, and utopian as well as feminist texts men author” [3:xiii]. The term was further conceptualized in *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction* (1992). Central to her study is the argument that “feminist fabulation calls for a new understanding of postmodern fiction which enables the canon to accommodate feminist difference and emphasizes that the literature which was called feminist SF is an important site of postmodern feminist difference” [3:xv].

Branding the postmodern canon as a masculinist utopia, Barr offers the stunning argument that FSF is not science fiction at all but is really metafiction about patriarchal fiction. For lending FSF more credibility and preventing the canon from merging what she terms ‘feminist fabulation’ with mainstream feminist science fiction, the critic traces the connection between modernist feminist writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Virginia Woolf to feminist fabulation authors like Octavia Butler.

Barr's identification of feminist SF as postmodernist fiction does not seem convincing. Veronica Hollinger, a prominent feminist critic, considers that her arguments tend to simplify the very complex interactions between feminism and postmodernism. In the article *A New Alliance of Postmodernism and Feminist Speculative Fiction: Barr's Feminist Fabulation* (1993) Hollinger asserts that the postmodern sensibility (i.e. expressing nostalgia for but loss of belief in the concept of the human subject as an agent effectively intervening in history, through its fragmentation of discourses, language games, and decentering of subjectivity) is, on the whole, incompatible with many aspects of the feminist enterprise (i.e. seeking a subjective identity, a sense of effective agency and history for women which has hitherto been denied them by the dominant culture). Most feminist SF writers (and readers) – like most feminist theorists – have very little interest in, or affection for, the ironic and frequently nihilistic 'playfulness' of the postmodern. Its ironic stance contradicts many projects of feminism, which are serious, grounded in real-life experiences, and utopian in a way which the postmodern rarely is [5].

Hence, FF can be characterised as a new heterogeneous trend in American literature that is based on the feminist theory and exists at the background of the postmodern. It cannot be distanced from SF because many aspects of feminism are the variants of modern mythology concerning the gender roles (Ilyin I.P.) [1:135]: the mythologema of feminism uses SF or 'thought-experiment' (Le Guin) as a transcendent vehicle for 'social engineering' on the themes of motherhood, family life, violence, and government, and utopia/dystopia remains the best means for it.

Nowadays the term 'feminist fabulation' is widespread among the American critics: almost each woman working in the genre of speculative fiction is considered as a representative of FF (e.g. Dr. Katie King's course on feminism and cultural studies at University of Maryland) [6]. The majority of female authors of SF and fantasy actually have a feminist slant, but, for instance, such writers as Leigh Brackett, Louise Marley, Andre Norton do not concentrate on feminism that is why the given approach ignores the feminist idea as the very core of FF.

It would seem to me that the canon of American feminist fabulation includes SF and fantasy by Eleanor Arnason, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Octavia Butler, Molly Gloss, Nicola Griffith, Nancy Kress, Ursula K. Le Guin, Vonda McIntyre, Suzy McKee Charnas, Gwyneth Jones, James K. Tiptree (Alice Sheldon), Amy Thomson, etc. The 'pure' SF writers such as Maureen McHugh, Judith Merrill, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Mary Doria Russel, Sherri Tepper, Joan Vinge, and Connie Willis can be taken into the group of feminist fabulists as well. It's important that there is no outstanding feminist author in the USA who writes fantasy and does not pay attention to SF: fantasy as a very normative genre is more patriarchal and conservative than SF.

The contemporary cultural production of FF also includes poetry (Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy), criticism (Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ), mainstream (Dorothy Bryant, Octavia Butler, Molly Gloss, Ursula Le Guin, Suzy McKee Charnas, Marge Piercy, Mary Doria Russell), mystery novels (Katharine V. Forrest, Suzy McKee Charnas, Sherri Tepper), children's books (Ursula K. Le Guin, Joan Vinge), etc.

At present the American FF corresponds to the tastes of politically oriented and intelligent female readers, and its social influence grows. The aesthetic values of FF fiction improve as well: the best authors are prize-winners of *The James Tiptree, Jr. Award* that is given in honour of Alice Sheldon each year for a work of science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender. It was originated at WisCon (the Wisconsin Science Fiction Convention that is generally acknowledged as the world's only feminist-oriented SF convention and conference and is held annually throughout the four day weekend of Memorial Day, in Madison, Wisconsin) in 1991.

In connection with what has been said here, it would be stressed that the goal of FF should not be to enter the canon (literary or theoretical) on its terms, but to transform the canon through its relationship with feminist fabulation, taking into consideration the social importance of the given fiction. From Debora Halbert's, a politologist, point of view, "...categorization is essential, but... it is time to

evaluate what the boundaries demarcate and perhaps transform them to include aspects of feminist fabulation. I am not arguing that we do away with boundaries all together, but simply become aware of what is excluded and what has transformative power” [4].

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2. Barr Marleen S. Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory. – New York : Greenwood Press, 1987. – 214 p.
3. Barr Marleen S. Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction. – Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992. – uix + 312 p. (342 p.).
4. Halbert Debora. Feminist Fabulation: Challenging the Boundaries between Fact and Fiction, 2001. – Online at: <http://www.futures.hawaii.edu/j2/halbert.html>.
5. Hollinger Veronica. A New Alliance of Postmodernism and Feminist Speculative Fiction: Barr’s Feminist Fabulation // Science Fiction Studies. – Vol. 20, Part 2. – July 1993. – P. 5-8.
6. King Katie.  
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7. Merrick Helen. Slumming with the Space Cadets: An Argument for Feminist Science Fiction // Outskirts: Feminisms Along the Edge 3 (n.d.). – 30 Mar. 2001.

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