

Science Fiction: The Future Mythology for the West

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This paper analyzes how science fiction became full with rich realms of future and why it is often called as the mythology of the future. After its fullfledged emancipation as a genre in the beginning of the twentieth century, it has always romanced with future. Basically, when it was separated from main stream fiction, the discourse of the genre was just partial or imagined scientific elements mingled with romance set in the form of stories. But, by the passage of time, future portrayal has become an essential part of Science Fiction. It is Science Fiction's business to predict future and its writers never claim for the acceptance of its accurate prediction. But it is true that whenever a good Science Fiction was born, there was a romance with future in it. Now, Science fiction as a genre is the most influential form of future, which interweaves imagination, future and science in a manner to arouse readers' future consciousness. The paper probes into the issue how future has become Science Fiction's essential part and what result it has brought about the genre and its readers in general. Only within the last few years has science fiction been recognized as a branch of literature. This delayed acceptance is not surprising for much rubbish labeled as science fiction has been published. But when Jules Verne, John Campbell, Arthur C Clark, H.G. Wells and Isaac Asimov— to name only a few of the best—enriched the genre with rich realms of universal

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themes, it was acquiring the mindsets of discerning readers in the West. Now Science Fiction has become enormously popular and it accounts for one in ten books sold in Britain, and in the United States the number is as high as one in four. Nowadays, taking together science fiction and fantasy, thousands of novels are published every year.

Science fiction has its origin in the ancient myths, legends, fantastic adventures and imaginary voyages. It belongs to a story telling tradition that began when men first started to narrate the legendary exploits of the gods. When the general awareness of time and ignorance of surroundings began to haunt humanity, mythology started to guide them. General awareness of time includes to predict and imagine the future, to have hope about the immediate and farthest future, to set plans and goals for future, to evaluate different possibilities and choices for tomorrow, and total set of ideas, visions, beliefs, motives and attitudes about tomorrow. These basic abilities of mankind are called as future consciousness in general. It is mythology which gave a hope and guidelines for mankind to fulfil his future consciousness.

Ancient myths cannot be underestimated as mere fables, it is the earliest recorded form and probably the most eternal and influential form of futurist thinking. Though not exclusively addressed to future, it has had a great impact on people's beliefs and attitudes towards the future (Lombardo 7). Being a combination of great literature and future consciousness (also of ancient beliefs, mysticism, and heroism), mythology has been the inspiration for much of the arts and literature of the succeeding ages; especially it provided us with an awareness for probable futurist thinking in fiction. In this way, myths had a great influence over how fiction began to anticipate on future. This is how fiction started to think about future, and sooner, when it reached the stage in which science altered mankind's contemporary life and

future existence, it started to depict a science- sponsored tomorrow of the kind.

Though mythology could guide people towards a hope, there were many superstitions attached to the reason for existence and cosmic ideas. The fundamental answers of life and truth had been plainly grounded in holy texts and prophecies. These sets of beliefs and solutions are not justifiable by modern scientific standards. In the age of transition, Science altered all dimensions of existential questions from illusion to facts. The Seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a rapid emergence of the philosophy of the enlightenment and consequent developments of Science and secular ideas resulted in the vast correction of age old beliefs. Science based its results on empirical evidences and proofs rather than illusions and prophecies. When Lombardo talks about the genesis of science fiction, he says that when the age-old tradition of storytelling of strange and wondrous realities embraced the ideas and principles of Science and secular progress as a way to explain its imaginative settings and characters, science fiction was born (12).

From the aforesaid reasons, it can be understood that mythologies could answer man's deepest metaphysical questions from prehistoric time onwards. About the religiously attributed myths, Thom Lombardo makes the following observation:

myth provides personal meaning connecting the individual and social group with God's purpose and with the great narrative of history. Religious myths explain existence in the form of stories, connecting past, present, and future in a way that is easily understood and highly inspirational. Often associated with myths are ethical principles, providing ideals and direction for people in their lives. (7)

Myths created an archetype for basic human existential qualities like death and renewal of life, honor and courage, love and devotion, good and evil, and creation. These basic features of mankind were established by the mythological characters through a sense of personal identification created by them. These archetypal patterns and beliefs were attached to humanity and it provided personal meaning connecting the individual and social group with the creators' purpose.

From a modernist perspective, the ancient myths are based on archaic thinking. They are oblivious to modern Science and the issues of modern life. One has to agree that they are not capable of catering to the needs of a modern day supplicant. If myths have a unique power to guide people, then what now needed is a new guide rooted in contemporary theories that address current needs as well as future needs. So, the modern day Science fiction is labeled as "scientifically credible myths". Therefore science fiction is rooted in reason and rationale could, and it will guide humanity with meaning and reason in future also. In a rational world that has destroyed all the old myths, the human being needs new one to explain the inexplicable, to give shape to his unconscious racial and personal obsessions and to recreate his archetypal images anew.

In the 1968's panel discussion of Modern Language Association of America chaired by Bruce Franklin, Del Ray observed, "we had back looking myths. They looked back to a golden age. Now we have predictive myths, forward slanting myths. That is the spirit, the soul of science fiction. (102)" The distinguishing mark of SF writer is his concern with man in circumstances and situations that have not yet arisen but that are possible in the future. "What would happen if?" the Science Fiction writer asks, using his knowledge of science and his

imagination to envisage the more or less probable consequences of contemporary Science and technology.

Although later day Science is enigmatically complex for an ordinary man, he invents his faith and hope in it and considers it a shaper of life. If not in a mass range, in the minds of many, the age old gods have been substituted by Science whereas science fiction takes up the position of the ancient mythologies for the future generations by incorporating the nuances of Science today. Attempting to create new archetypes and symbols by recourse to the Science and scientific methods, science fiction succeeds in creating mythologies anew.

Since the contemporary Western culture lacks a mythology, and needs it badly, it has to find a new mythology through science fiction. Unlike the past, when real and fantastical, natural and supernatural, were all intertwined, the present isolates the real from the mystical drastically, and so science fiction comes in an attempt to recreate the mythology we have lost. Being the land of Science and science fiction, the West can depend on the genre as the East did on ancient myths.

Having assumed the reflective role of the ancient mythologies that guided and made people's life more meaningful, science fiction has become the mythology of future. It is expected that the scientific advancements and futuristic thinking can provide sustenance for a better mythology of future that would take the course of humanity for new pastures.

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