Chapter V

Multiple Realities

In this chapter, we will critically reflect on similarities and differences between the fictional works of Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith and their responses to the concept of alien. Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith harbor an intense concern for mixing the known and the unknown to create the world of *novum* unfamiliar to the human experience. The *novum* in the novels of Jones and Griffith gives a new perspective on existing notions of human and non-human as offered by Jones in the Aleutian trilogy and of a new set of norms of women’s world as established by Griffith in *Ammonite* and *Slow River*. The recasting of the familiar reality set in the imaginative mould of the *novum* has a dual role to play. On the one hand, *novum* is the recognition of reality evoked from the reader through the rational understanding of the existing social conditions, and on the other hand, it is the estrangement of the reality recast in the defamiliarised mode. In this way, peculiarly, the co-presence of estrangement and cognition in the novels of Jones and Griffith allows Science Fiction to relate to our own world as well as positing challenge to our understanding of ordinary world.

1. A Journey from Prophetic to Metaphorical

Though Jones and Griffith work with different forms of the alien through their respective concerns, a link that bonds the
novelists’ diverse work is that they assign broad function to science and technology in their novels to speculate on human world and explore issues that have been dubbed controversial and taboo in the society. The writers deal with the idea of technological innovation that plays a significant role in formation of the *novum* in the novels we have chosen for the study. Importantly, they go beyond the use of physical properties of technological innovation. As we have seen, in the last part of the trilogy, *Phoenix Café*, technology becomes complex to reside and it is ‘modeled in virtuality, which is where human consciousness resides’. As Buonarotti says,

> It's a field of potential out of which springs a world made of minds, a bit like a vacuum fluctuation. It's been known for centuries that habitual gamers have different neuronal mapping. More of it, basically, layers of other worlds complete but existing nowhere in normal time and space: that was the clue.... She used what she learned to model a version of what Bright calls the pump: being into nothingness and back again. But she modeled in virtuality, which is where human consciousness resides. (336, *Phoenix Cafe*)

Through the *novum* of science and technology, these writers engage in an epistemological critique. They adopt science as a metaphor as part with own epistemological argument that science does not hold all the epistemic cards. Gwyneth Jones’ idea of the Common Tongue is the befitting example in this regard. The Common Tongue extends its ‘scientific value’ into the transformed language to reflect on the contemporary life speculated society. Jones shares her understanding of scientific and technological complexities as:
I raised and dismissed the possibility that they were time-travelers returning to their forgotten planet of origin; and the other possibility that they had grown, like us, from humanoid seed sown across the galaxy by some elder race. They were an absolutely, originally different evolution of life. But they were the same because life, wherever it arises in our middle dimensions, must be subject to the same constraints, and the more we learn about our development the more we see that the most universal pressures-time and gravity, quantum mechanics; the nature of certain chemical bonds-drive through biological complexity on every fractal scale, from the design of an opposable thumb to the link between the chemistry of emotion and a set of facial muscles. This sameness, subject to cultural variation but always reasserting itself, was shown chiefly in their ability to understand us. ¹

As such, Science Fiction, claims Parrinder, works at “the level of the social structure, of individual experience, and in the perceived nature of reality itself.”² The Aleutian trilogy is a search for the possible scientific advances (like the FTL technology) and it is about characters’ struggle to find their individuality amongst the technological advancements. The trilogy revolves around the fact that the main character, Marghe who is trapped in constructs of the world of technology and the anti-virus technology is an entry into a new construct but it is also a failure. This interface and tension between the human and the mechanical or technological world, both associated with the Company, culminates in a vision of technology as a fatal failure against growth of the virus. Judith Newton claims that the conflict between the human society and the technology create fantasies. According Newton, expression of the
fantasies includes that the individual action has resolved economic and social horrors.³

Further, as Parrinder observes, Science Fiction of Jones and Griffith has developed not only stock of imagined alternatives continued to multiply, “but their status has changed from what I shall call the prophetic to the mythic and to the metaphorical.” ⁴ Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith, while assigning broad function to science and technology in their novels, speculate on human world to explore issues that have been dubbed controversial and taboo in the society in which they arose. With this, we can see that science in the novels of Jones and Griffith is not purported to be pure escapism, full of bug-eyed monsters, ray guns, or rocket ships removing the imagination too far from the reality.

Being at the heart of the creation of the fictional world in the novels of Jones and Griffith, the novum of the alien encounter establishes tension between known and unknown. Contrary to the man-centric approach, Gwyneth Jones and Griffith break away from the typical ways of representing the alien encounter in Science Fiction and presenting the aliens as super-beings whose superior knowledge and /or superior social organisation will save human beings from our destructive tendencies. Also, the concentration on the physical aspects of alien beings or matters might have resulted in propagation of differences being reduced to stereotypes. However, a noteworthy aspect of the novels we have discussed in detail is that they do not create any extremities and provocations in narrating the first contact between the human and the alien. The third person narrator in White Queen describes the experience,
No one was taking any notice of the explorers. They weren’t behaving any differently from the local bystanders, who were standing around, nervous and excited, waiting to see if blood would be shed. But they were convinced that ‘stranger’ was written all over them. (15, *White Queen*)

Avoiding the cliché of vastly superior aliens swooping down to subjugate humanity and strip its resources, Jones’ Aleutians live among humans for a while, cloaking their existence, until a strange emotional relationship between human (Johnny Guglioli, a UFO chaser), and an alien (Agnes/Clevel) residing in Africa. They are determined to explore Earth quietly and privately by relating themselves with Earth and making their association with the new space. At a point, Agnes talks about Earth saying that “I came to find the new, but there is nothing new.” (18, *White Queen*) With Agnes’ observation that ‘nothing is new’ on Earth, Jones opens up the alien-Aleutian narrative to present the universe with multiple perspectives in order to get rid of limited understanding that Earth and human beings are at the centre of the universe.

Griffith’s work offers a different approach in creating the alien world by viewing gender and sexuality issues in very different ways. *Ammonite* and *Slow River* are set in the world entirely without men. The only man with a significant role but with invisibility in *Ammonite* and *Slow River* is the protagonists’ father whom women remember in flashbacks. Actually, Griffith nowhere seems to be apologetic for this only female situation. Also, she does not thrust the situation into our faces. In her ‘Judge’s Notes’ for the Tiptree Award, Ursula K. LeGuin has asked the reader to
consider how many women there are in, for example, Moby Dick. And she ends with a cute quote from Kate Clinton that, “When women go off together it’s called separatism. When men go off together it’s called Congress.”

The dystopia-kind of narrative in Slow River uses the cyborg to represent the ‘Other’; because of Lore’s differences from men as well as other women. In this sense, the female cyborg of Lore can never be represented as a figure of equality with them. The implicit observation Griffith makes in creating the character of Lore is that there will always be sexual and gender-based discrepancy within the society until the non-human and the female have stopped being regarded as the ‘Other’ and technology be viewed as a tool of both liberation and oppression. Generally, the difference between the cyborg and the human is drawn on the basis of creating the cyborg characters with the lack of any biological ‘sex’: cyborgs have no genitalia and so are unable to reproduce in the human way. In Slow River, however, the female designated cyborgs are equipped with the female physicality, which makes them vulnerable in one sense to the male and also female ‘gaze’ which in a sense is a problematic.

Nicola Griffith also shows a hierarchy amongst the two cyborg features Ammonite and Slow River. Marghe is the leader of her mission, thanks to her abilities above and beyond those of any of the male-designated cyborgs. This is basically due to her incredible competence at her job and her positioning as the narrative’s central protagonist effectively that allows inverting the gender roles conventionally allocated to the male-centric fictional characters. Marghe is far more able than others-male and female
working at Company as she is holding a great deal of power and intelligence over others. This clearly defies common conventions of narrative, where it is mostly always a male playing the central role and in a position of power. Spanner in Slow River is cold, precise, and logical, making no mistakes and having all those qualities that are popularly attributed to males within Science Fiction. Added to this is the collection of technological devices that all the female characters in Griffith’s work can handle that also inverts male designated roles in the world of technology human beings inhabit.

The female only world in Ammonite doesn’t view gender and sexuality as an issue in a very straight forward manner. Whether men and women have equal roles, or whether they are unequal, their roles are only seen as problems by the inhabitants of the Earth, Company and Marghe who visits the extra-terrestrial space. In this sense, the female only world is mirror for human beings to reflect on contemporary concerns of gender based hierarchies exiting within the human society. The inhabitants at Jeep themselves do not see any direct issue in the boundaries of gender, and it could be said, therefore, that they are not representative of today’s world or society, because in real life we are constantly challenging the gender boundaries.

Gwyneth Jones’ Aleutian trilogy cannot be considered to have strong features of cyborg the way Griffith’s Ammonite and Slow River exhibit. However, a character like Goodlooking aka Bella embodies some of the cyborg features and stands apart from other human as well as the alien characters in the trilogy. Bella is the product of a tissue sample taken from Johnny Guglioli that
somehow has been modified to produce an Aleutian foetus. On the advice of Sydney, Goodlooking adopts the title, Bella, a name that has the same denotative meaning but that ‘sounds’ more like a ‘real’ name to humans. Aleutians have produced this hybrid to heal an interpersonal conflict and to reveal the location of the FTL travel device. Interestingly, Bella’s body is Aleutian in its anatomy with no nose and having the hermaphroditic genitals and limbs that can reverse unlike human limbs. There has been mystery around who Goodlooking really is. A rumour is that he is not really the librarian, but the truechild- the fated lover-of someone very important. He has given a false identity at birth to hide himself from his lover’s enemies. Bella prefers to be called by the pronoun ‘him’ however his ‘disability and weakness’ make him appear female to humans. Therefore, the female pronoun is often used to refer to her in interactions with humans and male pronoun is used while narrating from aliens’ point of view.

A close look at the alien construction in the novels of Jones and Griffith reveals that Griffith’s novels are less successful in creating ‘alien world’ because her handling of aliens is ‘too human’ in a sense her characters speak the human language and fail to create unfamiliar world. They focus too much on supposedly general approach towards alien world through human eyes. Jones, instead, creates her alien world not as a compendium of ‘facts’ and ‘laws’ and ‘society’ but as an on-going encounter between human and alien. Also, characters in Jones’ novels are far more complex, handled as ‘subjects’ and not objects, producing a humanly – realised situation which is one of the finest examples of how an alien world can be used to study humanity dialectically.
2. A Play of Codic conventions

The novels through the alien, as we have argued in second chapter, hold ‘a play of codic conventions’ in creating fictional spaces unfamiliar to the human experience. The ‘play’ however also establishes cognitive connections with the estranged world by responding to contemporary social and political concerns set within the unfamiliar world. Within the strangeness of the novum, the social and personal issues within the narrative speak to human experiences and satisfy cognitive and sublimative needs together. Furthermore, as we have seen, the novels respond to the ‘conditions of being’ in the form of extrapolative narrative and consider what we have due cause to hope and fear. Griffith has asserted on this role of Science Fiction. She says,

When I read I want not only the writer's analysis of how their world has affected them (whether that's the present or the future, here or somewhere else, gay or straight), but also of how they can then affect the world. I like a writer who can expose systems: political, biological, social and cultural. Sometimes mainstream is just a little too self-involved and personal, a little too myopic.

In establishing connections between the fictional world and the ‘real’ world, the novum of the alien is seen as a symbolic manifestation of something that connects it specifically with the world we live in. Jones and Griffith perceive Science Fiction as, in Samuel Delany’s words ‘a symbolist genre, because it seeks to represent the world instead of reproducing it’. Kenneth Burke in his Counter-Statement asserts that an artist producing symbolic
artifact must begin “with his moods to be individuated into the subject-matter, and his feelings for technical form to be individuated by the arrangement of subject-matter.”

Burke then claims that “art is eternal in so far as it deals with the constants of humanity…But art is also historical-a particular mode of adjustment to a particular cluster conditions.”

The novels of Jones and Griffith present ‘conditions’, as Burke demonstrates, set within the dominant societal attitudes reflected in the socio-historical context of patriarchy and colonialism. In this regard, on the one hand, when Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith fictionalise individuated symbols, they create symbols that might fall outside the domain of dominant societal attitudes. On the other hand, the dominant societal attitudes are considered ‘alien’ against the established norms of the human society.

Science Fiction of Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith discussed in this study is diverse in its representations, in terms of both content and form. The symbolic appropriation of the alien characters and settings approach the human context on the levels of social and individual contexts that involve in the story. Needless to say, there is an interaction between the two levels. Griffith’s social context, for example, focuses on another planet of Jeep setting her characters actually at Jeep but through strong human references. Jones also concentrates on Aleutia but setting the narrative actually on Earth and not Aleutia. As a literature of ideas, the symbolic appropriation of the alien establishes the codified process to explore the creative and politicised space either within the utopia or the dystopia.
The issues that continually surface in the novels of Jones and Griffith explore the power dynamics of the complicated relationship between identity and difference. The social and economic politics and the colonial contexts have found entry into the fantastic new worlds of these novels. The alien constructions that takes shape in these novels—Aleutians and non-terrestrial ‘alien’ bodies—all contribute to the breaking of established norms and of identities based in bipolar understanding of man and woman, human and non-human and so on. Primarily, as we have seen, these novels open up new debates in discussion of identity and difference, feminity and masculinity, colonizer and colonized. Interestingly, as the research demonstrates, the category of human has been challenged by the novelists to recognize the difference. Thus, creative explorations of cultural anxieties in Science Fiction often involve theoretical investigations as well as theory production through complex interactions of reader, writer, and text.

As feminist biologist and theorist Donna Haraway observes in her published interview, *How Like a Leaf* that “Science Fiction is political theory.” 11 The intersections of theory, politics, and pleasures of imagination enable creative and complex theorizing. Our discussion of the alien constructions is informed by Haraway’s idea that some Science Fiction texts not only incorporate feminist theory but actually produce it. However, theories and texts do not necessarily inform each other directly but are based in a shared “climate of opinion”12 that makes certain ideas worth pursuing in different disciplines. Production of meaning does not take place in a dualistic relationship of either reader or text (interpretation), or text and social context (social construction). Instead, meaning is
produced in complex constellations where texts and theories are situated, in the treatment of the text as both a semiotic and a material structure: The text must be understood as a term in a process, that is to say a chain reaction encompassing a web of power relations. Like Braidotti argues, what is at stake in the textual practice, therefore, is less the activity of interpretation than of decoding the network of connections and effects that link the text to an entire socio-symbolic system. In other words, we are faced here with a new materialist theory of the text and of textual practice. It shifts discourses away from a hierarchical structure of theory building toward a more open, multileveled production of theory and toward interdisciplinary approaches within feminist inquiry. Ann Brooks has argued that the Second Wave feminism bases its claims on an appeal to ‘the liberal humanism of enlightened modernity’: for example, it assumes that a simple reversal of the hierarchical dualism of ‘man/woman’ will affect the liberation of the female half of the equation. The feminist approach indebted to postmodernist thought, however, will tend to question the ideological process by which ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are placed in separate, oppositional, categories, and may, indeed, seek to destabilize the notion of the autonomous subject (gendered or otherwise) altogether, thus rendering the development of any kind of overarching meta-theory impossible.

While taking Brooks’ point further, we would like to make a point that Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith incorporate and produce a convergence of feminist and post-colonialist discourse. We would like to quote Robert Young’s argument in his regard that
gender differentiation cannot be separated from the practices of colonialism. He writes,

It is clear that the forms of sexual exchange brought about by colonialism were themselves both consequences and mirrors of the modes of economic exchange that constituted the basis of colonial relations; the extended exchange of property which began with small trading-posts and the visiting slave ships originated, indeed, as much in the exchange of bodies as of goods, or rather of bodies as goods: as in that paradigm of respectability, marriage, economic and sexual exchange were intimately bound up, coupled with each other from the very first.\textsuperscript{15}

In this sense, the research reinforces need to address colonial discourse with ideological underpinnings that would require the construction of human bodies of the Other not only within racial politics and gendered hierarchies, but also within the units of exchange in economic, sexual, and cultural intercourse. Jones and Griffith need be seen in terms of their predominantly political stands and concern coupled with the struggle against oppression and injustice. Both reject the established hierarchical, patriarchal system, and deny the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority. As Jones calls it ‘the doubled purpose’ and writes that she

wanted to study the truly extraordinary imbalance of wealth, power, and per capita human comfort [...] that came into being over three hundred years or so of European rule, but also that she wanted ‘--the other doubled purpose--to describe and examine the relationship between men and women’.\textsuperscript{16}
The oppressed woman is in this sense akin to the colonised subject. The Science Fiction writing The generation of writers like Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith consider both women and ‘natives’ in the colonial state as minority groups who are unfairly treated. Both have been reduced to stereotypes and are not given any identity other than subservient by dominant system frames them. Broadly, Jones and Griffith have responded to this viewpoint and subsequently evolved their fiction through a dialogue with the concerns of gender, colonial subject- hood as significant political factors in creating hierarchies within sexed and colonial discourse.

In our concluding remarks we would like to highlight significance of the alien with the help of Kenneth Burke’s proposition of ‘normal’ discourse that comprises

the standard and expectations members of discourse communities share since the prevalence of a community’s discourse is partly established and maintained through process of labeling individuals as being either insiders or outsiders, as having or lacking the values, knowledge and skills required to belong to community.17

As Burke has pointed out, people often identify with discourses of communities in unconscious ways. Moreover, those who are excluded from becoming members of a certain discourse community will often exhibit nonstandard, deviant, ‘abnormal’ discourse. From the perspective of the patriarchal and colonial discourse, then, the alien encounter discourse that challenges gender discrimination or breaks established boundaries of coloniser and colonised is abnormal, alien and non-standard. But, for
feminist and post-colonial understanding it is transformative and revolutionary discourse. In Teslenko’s opinion, the function of fiction is related to idea of practical and aesthetic attitudes and it holds possibilities of challenging the standardised polarisation of human roles and categories to overthrow the authoritative codes that are often inscribed into the dominant discourses. Likewise, being an ‘abnormal’ discourse, Science Fiction with the feminist and post-colonial discourses repeatedly identified the oppressed situation and attempted to turn the dominant discourses inside out, and tried to develop a recurring, characteristic way of writing through the theme of alien encounter. They created new conceptual spaces for the metaphoric transformation of dominant discourses. These communities represented the actuality of a ‘para-space’ that is equivalent to the ‘third space’ or ‘elsewhere’. The present research has endeavored to study the ‘elsewhere’ spaces created by Gwyneth Jones and Nicola Griffith.