Technoculture in Margaret Atwood's Science Fiction Novels

Technoculture in Margaret Atwood's Science Fiction Novels

By

Jasmine Sharma

Technoculture in Margaret Atwood's Science Fiction Novels

By Jasmine Sharma

For my parents…

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

This book attempts a technocultural analysis of Margaret Atwood's SF novels. It delves into the conceptual and imaginative depth of elaborating the contemporary link between technoscience and literary humanities. It intends to undertake an in-depth interpretation of the cultural impact of technology on human and posthuman lives. The book posits how technological artefacts such as panoptical and biopolitical power, cyborgian corporeality, audio-visual technologies, consumption of archival memory, hybrid edibles, language, etc. become elements of technoculture—that is, technology as a culture to be consumed in different ways by different individuals. Amid growing interdisciplinarity, the book expects to contribute to the very interesting exploration of the SF genre raising a speculative mirror to explicit issues of contemporary concern. It looks forward to promoting an epistemological understanding of technology, not as an extensive application of science, but as a philosophy of techne whose purpose is to critically concretise the dynamics of the technocultural reconstitutions that the book extensively draws on. Overall, the book is a potentially exuberant addition to the extant literature on literary critical discourse. It unfurls an intellectual schemata of academic coherency and materialises as a handbook for students, research scholars, and academics in the literary philosophical genre.

PREFACE

The book presents an interdisciplinary bent of literary-critical ideas to bridge the gap between STS and the humanities. Connecting Atwood's speculative fiction with philosophical insights from technocultural theory, it expands a contemporary frame of reference amid dystopian times. Pregnant with profound epistemic expressions, the book encapsulates the essence of technology and how it redefines individuality constructing different ways of engaging with the world.

The uniqueness of thought that this volume offers includes mushrooming mediations within technology and technoscience. It delineates technology as a dynamic syndicate of the scientific and the philosophical. Unlike its mechanical, electronic, and cybernetic applications, the book locates the technological essence within the humanities. Or to put it another way, the book discusses the process of the technologisation of both technological (audio-visual and digital technologies, humanoid and cyborgian bodies) and non-technological (power, memory, epistemology, food, and language) facets of technology in Atwood's SF writings. By extending its reach beyond technical artefacts, devices carrying electronic and cybernetic components, and the various instrumental applications in mechanical, communication, and forensic industries, technology signifies a path of thought—a style of practice and structuring of human and posthuman realities. The book brings forth this explicative insight through Atwood's selected works while probing a specific enquiry into the science fiction genre of literature, inclusive of both speculative fiction and speculative feminism.

This book anticipates becoming supplementary reading for students, scholars, and academics working on Margaret Atwood as well as those conducting interdisciplinary research in the fields of literature and philosophy and their connection with broader STS schools of thought. It can also serve as a mainstream text for those working on science fiction and speculative dimensions in Atwood's writings. In fact, the book also anticipates the significant scope of literary examination in the future. It does so through extending a technocultural lens to multitudinous aspects of analysis in visual and digitally archived texts, in landscape or architectural studies and paintings, etc. Overall, the volume might feature as a prominent addition to library catalogues, individual bookshelves for private readers,

and many more. What it needs is a warm welcome and suitable support to survive in the global market.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is a sincere attempt to introduce myself to the intellectual forum of academic studies. As my debut monograph, it captures my diligent endeavour to connect the findings of my doctoral research with the extant audience. To be honest, writing this book has been an awesome journey that has taught me the value of life. In fact, it has made me realise my self-worth and has instilled in me the energy to think and celebrate the power of knowledge. Sitting for hours with a pen and a notebook on my table and two to three books open at once became my everyday routine from the day I decided to draft this volume. And here is the fruit of my active and resourceful enterprise.

However, I am not alone in this accomplishment of my debut milestone; rather there are people to whom I owe my warmest gratitude. First and foremost, I am extremely grateful to Dr. Rano Ringo, whose intellectual generosity guided me in conducting qualitative research on this area of study. Our constructive and mind-expanding discussions have inspired the nucleus of this book. Next, I owe an earnest debt of thanks to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Ropar, Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), and University Grants Commission (UGC) for funding my research in the form of travel allowances and a monthly fellowship, respectively, to enhance my skills and uphold my enthusiasm for research.

I also extend my gratitude to Professor Bijoy Boruah, the very first person who discerned an optimal potential in my doctoral research and had faith in its materialisation as a book; Dr. Ansu Louis (who is no more around us but his suggestions have always been a welcome addition to my research principles); and Dr. Sreekumar Jayadevan whose questions and recommendations during my progress seminars guided me through the philosophical perspective running through this book. I am also highly honoured and elated to publish this book with Cambridge Scholars Publishing. I am thankful to the publishers, especially Rebecca Gladers, the

INTRODUCTION

"I am a writer and a reader and that's about it."
(Atwood 2003, xviii)

"Writing is always an act of hope."
(Atwood 2019)

Regarded as one of the finest writers in the world, Margaret Atwood needs no formal introduction. Generations of inquisitive and voracious readers have assimilated epistemological and speculative insights from Atwood's admirable gift of expression and have witnessed her works as a prophetic voice within the contemporary canon. This book journeys towards a technocultural interpretation of Atwood's selected SF novels. It examines the urgent and culturally significant issues of technoscience and delves deeper into the technologised elements of power, corporeality, and consumption in her selected fiction.

Margaret Atwood: the author

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa, Canada. The second offspring of Carl Edmund Atwood, an entomologist, and Margaret Dorothy, a nutritionist, Atwood spent most of her time in the backwoods. Tutored at home until the age of eight, she developed an unquenchable appetite for reading books from her father's library at an early age. This introduced her to the world of fantasies and mysteries such as Dell Pocketbook mysteries, Grimms' Fairy Tales, Canadian animal stories, and comic books. Reflecting on her trajectory of growth as a writer, she recalled of her childhood:

> The childhoods of writers are thought to have something to do with their vocation, but when they look at these childhoods, they are in fact very different. What they often contain, however, are books and solitude, and my own childhood was right on track. There were no films and theatres in the North, and the radio didn't work well. But there were always books. I learned to read early as an avid reader and read everything I could lay my hands on—no one ever told me that I couldn't read a book. (*On Writers and Writing*, 2003, 6)

This passage reflects on the author's deliberative passion to read and undertake evocative expeditions to the world of knowledge and insights. Although literature and aesthetics didn't feature as a popular choice among Canadian youth growing up in a society where "writings and art were not the foremost topics of daily discussion" (*On Writers and Writing*, 2003, 5), Atwood still had a zealous underpinning for the creative appreciation of the writings she came across during her formative years.

Atwood aspired to become a professional writer at the age of sixteen. After completing her schooling at Lessie High School, Toronto, she joined Victoria College in the University of Toronto to study a graduate honours course in English. During her college days, she began publishing articles and poems in *Acta Victoriana*, the college literary journal. This strengthened her thirsty mind with an ardent fervour to write and express her imaginative and speculative faculty. However, as stated previously, Canada practised an insensitive attitude towards writers and writing. This fact can be concretised through the reluctance of Canadian publishing houses to publish the writings of newly emerging Canadian authors. Moreover, the country exercised the deep influence of the British and American colonisers and thus preferred to teach the canonical literatures of the occidental countries.

In an interview with the *Guardian*, Atwood recalls, "When I started in Canada it was very hard to be a writer. Very few Canadian writers were published, even in Canada. If you wrote a novel, you were told that there weren't enough readers in Canada, you must get a publisher in Britain, or the US" (Atwood 2010). Atwood's position as a woman writer within this Canadian scenario was even more challenging. A woman writing and publishing in Canada was regarded as a contemptible activity. Also, the male writers (if there were any) downgraded the creative potential of female writers. Atwood gave the following response when, in an interview, Graeme Gibson asked about the particular problems encountered by a woman writer:

> For so long, writing was regarded as a freaky thing to be doing, and in a frontier society what is more important is work and building houses and things like that. And writers are viewed as irrelevant or redundant. Men writers overreact to that and define writing as a male thing to be doing. And if you're a woman doing it that really threatens their position considering they've gone to all this trouble to tell anybody who sort of scorns their activity that what they're doing is really very hairy-chested. (*Waltzing Again*, 2006, 8–9)

However, the book remains cautious not to reinforce the idea of Atwood as a feminist author. Although the study dedicates an entire chapter to the notion of technobodies and female corporeality, the author still restrains

herself from applying the feminist label. When asked about her categorisation as a woman writer, she expresses her discomfort at such markers:

> Well, of course, now that Women's Lib has come along, it's very curious. Back in the days when you were supposed to pay attention to the diapers and the washing of dishes, I was a threat to other women's life positions. Now I get made into a kind of hero, which is just as unreal. It makes me just as uncomfortable. It's turning me from what I am as a writer into something I'm not. (*Conversations*, 1992, 11)

In fact, Atwood opts to call herself a "humanist" rather than promote the feminist label. For Atwood, humanism does not imply the dynamics of Renaissance humanism or those of the Enlightenment, which emphasise a static lexicon for human sensibility that is based on a heterosexual, able-bodied, white man of property. Humanism for Atwood refers to the prevalence of egalitarian consciousness between the races, genders, and species inhabiting this planet. This has indeed made the substantial corpus of her works gather critical recognition within and beyond Canada. Today, she is an internationally acclaimed Canadian nationalist, a cosmopolitan humanist, an anti-war advocate, an active environmentalist, posthumanist, and animal-rights activist, and, in particular, a prolific writer of eighteen novels, twenty-one volumes of poetry, ten short fiction collections, ten non-fiction works, seven children's books, five edited anthologies, four e-books, four audio recordings, three television scripts, and one graphic novel.

She has won several awards and medals for her published works such as the E. J. Pratt Medal for her poetry collection *Double Persephone*; the President's Medal at the University of Western Ontario; the Governor General's award for *Circle Game* and *The Handmaid's Tale*; and the City of Toronto Book Award, the Arthur C. Clark Award for best science fiction, the Commonwealth Literary Prize, and the Man Booker Prize (to name a few). She was conferred with an honorary Doctor of Literature degree from the University of Ireland. In addition, she holds honorary degrees from the Royal Military College of Canada, Oxford, Cambridge, and other internationally recognised universities. In all, she is the recipient of twenty-three awards and twenty-four honorary degrees to date. There is also a Margaret Atwood Society in Chicago run by academics interested in Margaret Atwood scholarship.

Along with establishing a literary benchmark, Atwood has pioneered the "LongPen Project." Designed by the Kiosk Factory in collaboration with her joint firm Unotchit—pronounced "you no touch it"—the project involves the launch of the "world's first long distance, real time, real pen

and ink auto-biographing device available on the internet" (thekioskfactory.net). Atwood uses this remote-control pen to virtually sign millions of copies. With this incredible feature, she makes herself democratically accessible to her global audience. About the "LongPen," the author comments, "you cannot be in five countries at the same time. But you can be in five countries at the same time with the Longpen" (today.net).

Atwood is also the first author to contribute to the Scottish artist Katie Paterson's Future Library Project (2014–2114). The objective of the project is to "select and invite the authors, and to compassionately sustain the artwork for its one-hundred-year duration" (futurelibrary.no). It selects authors on the basis of their outstanding contribution to literature and their imaginative expertise in rendering stories for generations of the future. For this, one of Atwood's works has been locked up for a century and will be available only to future readers. In this way the author enjoys reaching her immediate and far off spatial and temporal audience in innovative ways.

The purpose of this book is to examine the SF novels of Margaret Atwood. In particular, it explores technoculture in her selected writings and argues for the reconstitution of novelistic society through technoscientific means. Each of her science fiction novels reveals a fragmented society governed by a few powerful institutions. The novels incorporate perceivable elements of science and technology and illuminate the readers with their merits and limitations. The selected primary texts under consideration are *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), *MaddAddam* (2013) [the last three forming the *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003–13)], and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015). Each chapter of the book discusses technocultural methodology and specific technocultural facets in the light of the aforementioned primary texts. However, before delineating the intricacies of the SF genre, the book outlines the Canadian literary scene and Atwood's cosmopolitan identity within it.

Made in Canada, acclaimed worldwide:
Margaret Atwood's cosmopolitanism

Margaret Atwood's works have received global recognition. Her popularity is not limited to Canada; rather, her work has travelled across the world. However, Canada remains one of the primary sources of inspiration in her writings. This section charts the formation of a Canadian literary identity while placing Atwood's writings within and beyond its territorial circumference. In fact, it observes the interplay between Canadian and non-Canadian forces in her later writings. The selected SF novels for this book

fall into the latter category, where Atwood achieves a cosmopolitan status to the fullest.

Canada witnessed the predominance of two colonial powers, Britain and France, in the late fifteenth century. This colonisation turned Canada into a home for different cultures and identities such as the natives, the first nations, the indigenous, and the aboriginal (Hammill, 2007, 3). The Canadian identity became a subject of noteworthy concern as writers pondered the transforming demographic conditions of Canada. Atwood captures this heterogeneity of Canadian identity in her book *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. She asserts:

> A great deal has been made, from time to time, of the search for "The Canadian Identity"; sometimes we are told that this item is something we have mislaid, like the car keys, and might find down behind the sofa if we are only diligent enough, whereas other times we have been told that the object in question doesn't really exist and we are pursuing a phantom. Sometimes we are told that although we don't have one of these "identities," we ought to, because other countries do. (1997, 7)

This vexing question surrounding "the Canadian Identity" gathered importance especially after the withdrawal of the colonial powers. The people of Canada became conscious of their national status and began attempting to fit into one or another category. And within this Canadian identity crisis, literature too provided insightful inputs. Over the previous few decades, writers have synthesised textual accounts of individuals struggling within the spatio-temporal realities of their nation state. Their struggles form a mirror to the undercurrent of identity politics prevalent in their country. However, as the country has undergone major upheavals and centuries of subjugation, Canadian literature has been infiltrated with varying elements of multiculturalism. The writings of early Canadian authors demystify the concept of a singular national identity and portray heterogeneous identity transformations in their home country. And this shift of experiences has affected Canadian literature and made it more transnational and wide ranging in contemporary times. Explaining the wide stretch of Canadian literature, Faye Hammill writes:

> Canadian Literary studies have changed rapidly in recent years, partly because scholars have embraced new theoretical or inter-disciplinary approaches, and partly because the national literary canon has been expanded in two directions. Firstly, scholars and educators are increasingly attending to the divergent literary inscriptions of Canada in the work of different ethnic, regional or linguistic groups, focusing in particular on writing by ethnic minority authors or native Canadians, but also analysing

the construction of whiteness as a dominant category. Secondly, researchers have begun to recover the works of neglected nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, many of whom have been passed over because they wrote in popular genres or published in ephemeral formats such as magazines. Another very significant change is the marked increase, since about 1990, of the status of the most widely read Canadian authors on the international cultural scene: the phenomenon of the literary superstar has changed the way Canadian literature is perceived, both at home and abroad. (2007, 3)

Atwood's initial writings represent a Canadian spirit with characters situated within the pan-Canadian context. Works such as *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), etc., are set in Canada and thematise the issues of alienation, survival, upholding one's cultural heritage and the distinctive formation of the Canadian identity. However, her later writings, especially the selected SF novels considered for this book, feature settings transcending Canadian geography. The book emphasises this aspect as it catalyses Atwood as one of the entry points into a literary cosmopolitan identity. By making her characters and settings external to Canadian geo-politics, Atwood asserts her cosmopolitanism in vibrant terms. In fact, these non-Canadian and supposedly American settings disguised behind terms such as "Gilead," "The Compounds," and "Consilience" furnish an unsettling negotiation between Canada and the US and Atwood aggravates this uneasiness, presenting a speculative and scathing critique of these totalitarian hegemonies.

Therefore, the book necessitates a glimpse of the Canada–US issue, to argue for cosmopolitanism in Atwood's selected works. And this issue of the author's cosmopolitan identity is relevant to the SF novels selected for this study. A cosmopolitan identity gears up her worldwide recognition and facilitates a diverse exchange of thoughts and opinions. This identity prototype ushers the multiple perspectival readings of Atwood's works while bearing a huge critical impact on her literary output. The next section discusses select works by Atwood and how the present book is an addition to the already copious literature on her.

Atwood's writings: a critical commentary

This section examines some previous research on the works of Margaret Atwood (not limited to the novels selected for the present book). Further, it delineates how this book serves as a remarkable entry point to a new research enterprise, especially from a technocultural perspective. Several

research articles, book chapters, edited editions, theses, and entire volumes have been dedicated to Margaret Atwood's literary output. Ranging from feminism to psychoanalysis, from environmentalism to posthumanism, Atwood's works have been interpreted from varying perspectives. The book maps a selection of these perspectives and opens up an optimal pathway for an interdisciplinary microscopic discussion. The analysis accounts for the research and trends conducted in the twenty-first century. It does so in order to maintain the latest understanding of the thematic concerns in Atwood's writings. It is to be noted that this critical commentary emphasises the connection between what has already been researched and the elements this book seeks to interpret. Even though aware of the immensity of Atwood scholarship, the book outlines only selected insights that bear a direct relevance to the topic of this study.

Kiriaki Massoura in "The Politics of Body and Language in the Writings of Margaret Atwood" (2001) has discussed gender politics in Atwood's works. Issues related to body and language such as reproduction, maternity, pornography, etc. are explored in detail. Massoura has incorporated the theories of psychoanalytic feminism as put forth by Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray in her work. Overall, she has developed a critical understanding of the female body and women's language in Atwood's fiction.

Fiona Tolan in her book *Feminism and Fiction: The Novels of Margaret Atwood* (2007) has examined a chronology of Atwood's fiction. It interprets feminist themes in Atwood's earlier writings and moves on to discussing postfeminism in *Oryx and Crake*. Unlike Massoura's thesis, Tolan's monograph transcends corporeality and language and delineates the issues of postcolonialism and religious fanaticism in her work.

Silje Bjerke's "Reviewing Margaret Atwood" (2008) focuses on *Oryx and Crake* and *Moral Disorder*. It investigates Atwood's feminist credentials and locates her works within the dynamics of women's viewpoints and reader-response theory. The dissertation opens up a gateway to the critical aspect, i.e., how the audience responds to the author's works and studies the reasons behind those responses. Bjerke's work interprets the different statements given by critics and highlights how Atwood's literary output has grown and has been received by its critical audience.

Valerie Mosca in her essay "Crossing Human Boundaries: Apocalypse and Posthumanism in Margaret Atwood" (2013) traces a shift of theoretical viewpoint. Mosca's essay concretises a posthumanist analysis of Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy*. The essay explores the genetically bioengineered footprint on Earth and its negotiation with the surviving human population. This particular essay marks an entry point into the present argument

concerning posthumanism in the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, which also features as one of the sections of this book.

Daniel Miller's "Breaking the Rules: Three Novels Innovating Genre Fiction" (2016) comparatively analyses works by Margaret Atwood, Brian Evenson, and Colson Whitehead. Miller's work links the genres of science fiction, crime fiction, and horror fiction. It elucidates the dystopian impacts of capitalism and fetishism in the selected fiction genre. This text seeks to formulate a conducive ground for the development of science fiction (or, more emphatically, SF) as a separate and popular genre in literary academia today.

Houda Bouhadjar in "Women's Writing in Question: Politics and Aesthetics in the Novels of Margaret Atwood" (2017) charts a similar trajectory of research as attempted by Massoura and Tolan. The thesis interrogates the women's question. It does so through investigating politics and aesthetics in Atwood's selected writings. As mentioned earlier, Atwood is more of a humanist than a feminist and the theme of women's individuality is joined with that of egalitarianism. Bouhadjar's work will also be read for its individual-egalitarian aspect while discerning the issues of aesthetics and politics in Atwood's fiction.

Last but not least, Marinette Grimbeek in "Margaret Atwood's Environmentalism: Apocalypse and Satire in *MaddAddam Trilogy*" (2017) maps the impact of anthropocentrically engendered bio-terrorism on Earth. In alignment with Mosca's essay, Grimbeek's work discusses the theme of apocalypse in the *MaddAddam Trilogy*. The theme of apocalypse and posthumanism are crucial to the framework of the present study. These themes help in highlighting the significant elements of technoculture in Atwood's selected SF novels (to be explored in detail in the upcoming chapters).

The works mentioned above interpret Atwood's writings in terms of feminist, political, aesthetic, reader response, generic, apocalyptic, dystopian, and posthumanist concerns. Each of these undertaken studies portrays ideas of academic, critical, and scholarly importance. In fact, they have built preliminary theoretical insights for the present book. However, the scope of this book transcends the works as outlined above. The present book is a blend of apocalyptic, dystopian, and posthuman critical arguments. Or more specifically, it substantiates the philosophical syndicate of science and technology while delineating the technocultural elements in the SF novels of Margaret Atwood (to be explained further in the final section of this chapter). The next chapter discusses SF and its link with Atwood's selected writings followed by a brief introduction of the primary texts for this study. It also examines the dichotomy between science and

speculative fiction and the discursive positioning of Atwood's writings within a particular ambit.

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING SF

The genre of SF resists easy definition. An "ongoing process of negotiation rather than a fixed entity" (Bould and Vint, 2011, 1), it emphasises critical attention and debate amongst its various scholars and practitioners. Notably, this book maintains caution by using the term *SF* rather than *science fiction* or *speculative fiction*. This is because the genre exhibits a flexible inclusiveness of different intersecting elements such as science, technology, fantasy, speculation, estrangement, prophecy, and so on, and therefore a single term cannot suffice for its multifarious scope. Thus, the book uses SF as an umbrella term for the aforementioned plurality and aims to locate Atwood's problematic position within this amplified genre. For this, it primarily discusses the various aspects of SF followed by the author's notable comments on its generic stratification.

The fundamental source for the term SF for this book is Donna Haraway's Pilgrim Award acceptance comments. While accepting this prestigious award in 2010, Haraway highlights the potency of the SF genre. The theorist explains the exhaustive diversity of the term and asserts, "SF is that potent material-semiotic sign for the riches of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction on, science fact, science fantasy . . . string figures." "In looping threads and relays of patterning, the SF practice is a model for worlding. Therefore, SF must also mean 'so far,' opening up what is yet-to-come in protean entangled times pasts, presents and futures," Haraway continues (2011, 12). Thus, the book will use the term SF throughout in order to maintain the multifarious profundity of the term.

David Seed thinks of the SF narrative as an "embodied thought experiment whereby aspects of our familiar reality are transformed or suspended" (2007, 2). This transformation may be in the form of future voyages to space or new technoscientific innovations, the dynamics of which provide a new and better understanding of our present-day reality. In that sense, the *what if* dimension of SF bears significance while dealing with the concepts of possibility and impossibility in the narratives. It marks the notion of transcendence or coming back from one world to another and vice versa. This variation between different fictions or orchestrated realities illustrates the

transitory nature of the SF genre. It depicts the "in-between" impetus of the genre, making it "notoriously difficult to define" (Seed, 2007, 1).

Despite, an uneasy elucidation, scholars and critics have still tried to define the SF genre, offering divergent and contesting viewpoints. George Slusser in his essay "The Origins of Science Fiction" proclaims that "[SF] is all about science. It is a sole literary form that examines the ways in which science penetrates, alters and transforms the themes, forms and worldview of fiction" (Slusser, 2007, 28). On a milder note, Darko Suvin defines SF as 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" (2007, 372). Later, Damien Broderick refines Suvin's definition and notes:

> SF is that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supersession of technical-industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal. It is marked by (i) metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics, (ii) the foregrounding of icons and interpretive schemata from a collectively constituted generic "mega text" [i.e., all previously published SF] and the concomitant de-emphasis of "fine writing" and characterization, and (iii) certain priorities more often found in scientific and postmodern texts than in literary models: specifically, attention to the object in preference to the subject. (1995, 155)

Critics such as Lucie Armitt and Gwyneth Jones detach the science element from SF and delve into other important dimensions supplementing the genre. Lucie Armitt in her book *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction* notes:

> [SF] (Whether based on technological or a socio-political foundation) places a great emphasis upon the intrinsic link between perceived reality and the depiction of futurist and alien societies. Thus whatever the approach and whatever the gender, the depiction of an alternative reality is only the first step of an essential reassessment on the part of both the author and the reader, making strange what we commonly perceive to be around us, primarily in order that we might focus upon the existing reality afresh, and as outsiders. (2012, 9)

Challenging the spatio-centric premise of the SF genre, Gwyneth Jones writes, "SF doesn't have to be about rockets and intergalactic wars and defending the earth and all those boyish pursuits, Oh no. SF can be about things that are true and beautiful and womanly like sociology and town planning" (Lefanu, 2012, 179). Both these critics add a feminist insight into SF scholarship and pave the way for a more flexible explication of the

genre's characteristics. On similar grounds, Ralfaella Baccolini in her essay "Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction" advocates:

> women science fiction authors have contributed to the exploration and subsequent breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions—those damaging stereotypes—about gendered identities by addressing, in a dialectical engagement with tradition, themes such as representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality and language and its relation to identity. (2004, 20)

According to Veronica Hollinger, "in spite of the still popular conception of science fiction as inherently masculinist, it is in the interest of feminist readers to look closely at its potential for imaginative representations of the gendered subject, for re-presentations of difference and diversity" (2005, 127). This further accounts for a detailed investigation of feminist themes in SF narratives. In fact, all these definitions shall be read in the light of the selected writings of Margaret Atwood as the book dedicates a major section of a chapter to female corporeality.

In addition to the lack of a concrete definition, there is also debate over the origin of SF. For some, Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) is the first science fiction text. However, others consider Hugo Gernsberg as the pioneer of "scientifiction" in 1916, a term later used to describe his *Amazing Stories*, the first SF pulp magazine launched in April 1926. From then on, SF has been written, practised, published, and marketed in different forms and through different mediums. The present book investigates the selected published SF novels of Margaret Atwood. It emphasises the significance of SF in literature and how the intricacy of the genre engenders the critical engagement of academia.

After Gernsberg's *Amazing Stories*, many SF publications gained attention. In fact, different varieties of SF emerged with the growing popularity of the genre. The imaginative creativity of its composers fostered poly-faceted ways of engaging with their surroundings. This further called for astounding discussions, over the origin of SF, which was still divided on whether Gernsberg should be regarded as the real father of scientifiction. In the words of Paul Kincaid, "the history of SF really begins with the Renaissance, or more specifically with the exploration of the New World and the coincident spread of humanist learning through Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century" (2011, 22). Kincaid considers Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) to be the first SF narrative, supporting the "notion that man might fashion through rational endeavour his own better world" (2011, 22). Mark Bould and Sherry Vint in their *Concise History of Science Fiction* summarise as follows:

> The sense that SF is, or must be, something far larger than the American
> magazine and paperback tradition has tempted many to try to identify an
> earlier point of origin, the most successful in gaining adherents being the
> publication of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818). Adam Roberts (2006)
> contends that SF can be traced back to Ancient Greece, while Roger
> Luckhurst (2005) argues that it could only emerge in relation to the
> technological changes and mass literacy of the late-nineteenth century.
> (2011, 2)

The SF genre includes constantly shifting and overlapping sub-types. Each
label engenders a non-exclusive bracket inviting pluralistic connotations to
their broader divisions. All the aforementioned definitions entail the
categorisation of SF into various sections. Some of the sub-types of SF are
briefly, though not exhaustively, outlined below.

1. Hard SF

Hard SF is premised on the representation of scientific knowledge and
technological inventions in their narratives. It draws from subjects such as
physics, mathematics, engineering, and astronomy and builds stories around
their applications. According to David Samuelson, "hard SF reflects
scientific interpretations of reality" (495). Hard SF stories portray extra-
terrestrial settings, put theories into action, and project alien habitats and
setups geared with hardcore machinery and equipment. Hard SF also
displays non-human and robotic characters that offer viable technological
solutions to human problems of labour, business, or romance. Some popular
examples of hard SF include Isaac Asimov's "Evidence" (1946), Aldous
Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Stanisław Lem's *Solaris* (1961), and
Arthur C. Clarke's *A Fall of Moondust* (1961).

2. Soft SF

Unlike hard SF, which deals with scientifically rigorous subjects, soft SF is
concerned with the soft sciences or, more specifically, the social sciences.
Subjects such as sociology, psychology, culture, politics, and anthropology
feature as the fundamental themes in soft SF. In other words, soft SF is
concerned less with science and technology and more with humanity,
particularly human affairs. These narratives deal with human emotions,
interactions, and relationships. Soft SF stories, in contrast to hard SF, can
be based on unproven scientific facts and ideas as they emphasise the
importance of human bonds and not the theoretical models of
technoscience. Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), Michael
Flynn's *Eifelheim* (2006), and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2010)
fall under the soft SF category.

3. Space operas

Wilson Tucker coined the term "space opera" (1941) to refer to a "hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn yarn" (Sawyer 505). However, the term was eventually refined to mean SF adventure narratives by the 1980s. Imaginary explorations in SF gave rise to space operas where spaceships became the primary settings of the narratives. Space operas depict characters on conquests to alien planets and hollow lands in order to establish a human footprint. In other cases, space operas may also project the colonisation of foreign territories and formation of empires. Richard Fleischer's *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and famous series such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* are some popular exemplars of space operas.

4. Alternate history

In the words of Karen Hellekson, "alternate history is that branch of non-realistic literature that concerns itself with history turning out differently than we know to be the case" (453). This sub-type addresses the *what if* question with utmost precision and exhibits a world that may be a reality if the current zeal for conquest remains unperturbed. In a narrative portraying alternative history, the author explores the consequences of divergence from the normative schemata. Further, these writings imagine a world of contradictions and depict multiple universes where only individual intervention has the ability to transform the course of history. Some examples of this SF genre are Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Time* (1938), Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1953), Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* (1955), Gregory Benford's *Timescape* (1980), and *Back to the Future* (1985), etc.

5. Apocalyptic SF

Apocalyptic SF portrays the collapse of civilisations for reasons such as alien invasions, climate change, technological singularities, nuclear holocausts, etc. Aris Mousoutzanis compares SF with catastrophe "in terms of their shared relationship to model conceptions of progress and technology" (458). This implies that the advancement of technology for motivating a progressive society could be apocalyptic. It may lead to anthropocentric crisis as well as the rise of posthumanism on Earth. Works such as Robert Cromie's *The Crack of Doom* (1895), H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Fredrick Soddy's *The Interpretation of Radium* (1909), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, etc. are some examples of the apocalyptic SF genre.

6. Feminist SF

As the term suggests, feminist SF claims a space for women in the highly phallic society. It deals with gynocentric themes and portrays women at the nucleus of the narratives. They "serve as time machines, test tubes and windows to the future. They present possibilities which can help to develop alternatives" (Barr 81). Thus, feminist SF works on the pro-feminine agenda to highlight women's issues such as liberation, motherhood, work culture, etc. These stories bring forth a sexual revolution with women contesting the androcentric bias of the SF genre that, for so long, has been a domain of men. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Monique Witting's *The Guerilleres* (1969), Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) are some of the major examples of feminist SF.

7. Postcolonial SF

Yet another emerging sub-type of SF, postcolonial SF, "interrogates the complex Self–Other relationships created by colonial encounters. It imagines encounters with the Other (the alien, the strange newness brought about by change), typically from the perspective of the dominant Self (Reid 257). These narratives discern the presence of territorial and extra-territorial conquests and triumphs in the wake of building new empires. While engendering the dichotomy between the Self and the Other, postcolonial SF questions the subjectivities behind the creation of these binary logistics and calls for their deconstruction. Some well-known examples of postcolonial SF are Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), and Vandana Singh's "Delhi" (2004).

8. Ecological SF or climate fiction

Popularly known as eco-fi or cli-fi, ecological SF or climate SF posits a "back to nature" movement following a technological crash. Such narratives "explore the relationship between social structures and physical environments" (Bould and Vint 177). They depict an anti-technological drive and promote neo-primeval ways of life (Murphy 376). The fundamental themes in such fictions include overpopulation, industrialisation, precarity in food production, and resource depletion. Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), Arthur Herzog's *Heat* (1977), George Lentham's *Girl in Landscape* (1998), Karen Traviss's *Crossing the Line* (2004), etc. are some examples of ecological SF.