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Book Review: *Science, Gender, and History: The Fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood*

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***Science, Gender, and History: The Fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood*, Suparna Banerjee, 2014. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. 160 pages. Index included. ISBN (10): 1-4438-6220-7. ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-6220-2. £41.99, hardcover.**

Reviewed by:
William Tringali¹

Suparna Banerjee's book *Science, Gender, and History: The Fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood* discusses the topics mentioned with its title in the works of two of each of its mentioned authors. Each of Banerjee's chapters are further divided into sub-chapters with headings that inform the reader which aspect of science, gender, or history they will be focusing on, though ultimately the book succeeds in weaving the three subjects together. This book's four chapters are divided by novel. Chapters one and two focus on *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* by Shelley. And chapters three and four focus on *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* by Atwood. Banerjee ties all four novels together, but the strongest ties are made between *Frankenstein* and *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Last Man* and *Oryx and Crake*.

Within chapter one, *Frankenstein: Radical Science, Nature, and Culture* Banerjee states her defining ideology around which her arguments in the book are based. Discussing gender, culture, and nature, Banerjee follows Ortner's approach to understanding gender from an anthropological perspective. Banerjee takes the Enlightenment's anthropocentric arguments of man as an "autonomous being separate from and in control of his natural environment", and connects them to Ortner's argument of culture being a transcended "composite" in which humanity "attempts to assert control over nature. Nature, or the natural, is by Banerjee's argument a "realm to which woman is perceived to be closer than man". Banerjee argues that the alignment of man and woman within this dialect of nature and culture is "universal" and is used in her discussions of all four novels, regardless of the historical time period in which they were written (13).

Chapter one serves as a strong opening chapter for the book. This chapter covers the horror of a being of purely cultural creation floundering in his lack of connection to the natural, along with Shelley's both support of the ideals of the French Revolution and her dismay with its bloody coups. Banerjee also uses this chapter to tie *Frankenstein* to Shelley's later work *The Last Man*, along with Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Banerjee's second chapter engages the three focuses of her title with equal fervor, Banerjee's argument even involving to include a fourth focus.

The Last Man: Apocalyptic Speculation Beyond (Auto)biography opens with discussions of women's status within society. Discussing the nuances of Shelley's critiques, Banerjee argues that *The Last Man* shows "too much emotional investment inter-gender relationships can become self-destructive for women" while simultaneously noting that even "unfeeling" and ambitious women, like The Countess, "on her own, can reach nowhere near political power" (36, 37). The

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ideal woman of this era must be completely committed to her male relationships (husbands, sons, fathers, etc.) but being so committed to these relationships will destroy them. In this way, Shelley argues for the rectifying of “such schizoid and inequitable social arrangements” (38). Beyond this, Banerjee also argues that *The Last Man* explores the value of art. The fine Roman columns of *The Last Man* do not inspire or joy in the last human on Earth, but instead remind him of the beauty that will die with him. Battling against Romantic ideals of Art solving the world’s woes, Banerjee states that art “depends for its immortality on the continuance of mankind”. The value of art is instead its ability to link different generations and function as the “epitome of human culture” as opposed to its legacy on Earth (46).

This fourth focus of art is expanded upon along with science, gender, and history, in chapters three and four *The Handmaid’s Tale: Dystopian Speculation in the Feminine* and ‘*Open Markets and Closed Minds’: Apocalyptic Speculation in Oryx and Crake*. Where Shelley critiques how trapped women are in their patriarchal, culturally-assigned roles, Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* makes them literally trapped by their gender—even beyond specific role assignment. Forced to engage in heteropatriarchal, horrific relationships, Atwood encourages women to seek out “more liberating and equitable ways of relating emotively with men” (81). Along with this, Banerjee discusses patriarchal tendencies with historiography, and that focusing so desperately on remaining unbiased actually enables relativistic standpoints to slip by unnoticed. Finally, in tying *Oryx and Crake* to Shelley’s *The Last Man*, Banerjee argues that the original horrors of far-reaching, deadly imperialism within Shelley’s novel have evolved into the overpowered international corporations of modern times.

To begin, I would like to highlight what makes some of the arguments within this book strong. For example, both authors champion “moderation over radicalism, pragmatism over idealistic excess” (Banerjee, 135). Within *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* women that step too far outside the bounds of what is considered to be acceptable under the patriarchy are quite brutally killed. And while some readings of these texts have highlighted these deaths as notably less than feminist, Banerjee delves deeper into them. One of my favorite arguments within *Science, Gender, and History: The Fantastic in Mary Shelley and Margaret Atwood* involves Shelley’s simultaneous joy and horror in the wake of the French Revolution, citing another of Shelley’s books *History of a Six Weeks Tour*. Banerjee expertly uses this historical context to go into greater depth about the author herself, simultaneously adding to debates about Shelley’s “apparent political conservatism” regarding British colonization and expanding them to include Shelley’s perception on gender (25). Banerjee argues that Shelley’s repulsion towards the French Revolution inspired her arguments for slow and steady cultural change. Banerjee successfully weaves Shelley’s novels into the sociocultural and historical anxieties of their time. Banerjee’s analysis is rich with references to the works of other academics, and the scientific achievements/historically significant events occurring during the writing and publication Shelley’s texts.

For this reason, I would recommend scholars teaching these novels share the first chapters of Banerjee’s book in particular with their students, not only to teach them how to approach a novel from a socio-cultural, historical perspective, but to show students how to use the writings of other academics to support and enhance their own voice. Moreover, Banerjee’s use of an overarching theory to tie *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and *Oryx and Crake* together could be used to teach students how to apply anthropological theory within comparative literature studies.

Conversely, Banerjee's chapters dedicated to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* are dedicated mainly to analysis of the texts themselves. They comparatively lack the heavy use of historical context, and the connection to other scholarly works that made chapters one and two so valuable. While the settings of both of Atwood's works exist in the far future, Banerjee could have shared additional reference to the debates and challenges surrounding gender taking place at the time of their writing and publication.

For example, Atwood, in discussing the idea of a women-only nation through her character writes, "if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a woman-only enclave she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away" (172). I use this quote because it as well on page 67, but does not discuss the possible historical context behind it. Atwood is possibly referencing the "Sex Wars" of the 1980s, in which the idea of lesbian feminism was prominent. Lesbian feminism began as a counter movement, reacting to what some women saw as shortcomings in the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s, and creating many woman-only spaces. The latent homophobia in the women's rights movement and the sexism of the gay rights movement forced lesbians to form their own groups, such as the Radicalesbians, and write their own theories on gendered and sexual oppression. To be a lesbian was to be a woman-identified woman, to free oneself from relationships with men, theorists like Cheryl Clarke argued. Clarke's 1981 article "Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance" even stated that lesbianism "will ultimately reverse the heterosexual imperialism of male culture" (128). Discussed within this context, Atwood's comment on the necessity of 'inter-gender' interaction becomes much more relevant to the reader, as its socio-cultural context is understood, and Banerjee's arguments on *The Handmaid's Tale's* "inter-gender bonds" being necessary to strengthen become much stronger (Banerjee, 70).

A connecting critique is that I found this book, at times, to reflect heteronormative attitudes. To continue in the vein of *The Handmaid's Tale*, examples in Gilead, the nation in which the book's characters reside, there is a law against "Gender Treachery", or homosexuality (Atwood, 43). In this way, to perform gender correctly in Gilead is to be heterosexual and only to engage in heterosexual sex in the way the government mandates it, which is solely for reproductive purposes. Beyond this, one of the main characters, Moira, is a lesbian. And while Banerjee mentions her, it is in reference to her being a rebel. Her sexuality is not included, and would have been an interesting way into introduce ideas of lesbian feminism, to delve deeper into historically all-women or all-lesbian movements.

There are also places in which I would've liked to see stronger interconnections among the text is largely very successful in its interlacing of science, gender, history, and art.

Ultimately I commend Banerjee for exploring so much within these four books in a concise and very readable manner. The overall arguments of give the reader much to consider in a holistic manner that encourages the reader to examine all the texts within it. I would recommend this book to scholars in the fields of science fiction studies and women's studies, along with students interested in examining the works of either Shelley or Atwood or both.

Citations:

Clarke, Cheryl. "Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance". *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 2nd Edition. Ed. Moraga, Cherrie and Anzuldúa, Gloria. New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1981. 128-137. Print.