

Theme of Gender and Space in Joanna Russ's Novel
The Female Man

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Joanna Russ (1937-2011)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joanna_Russ

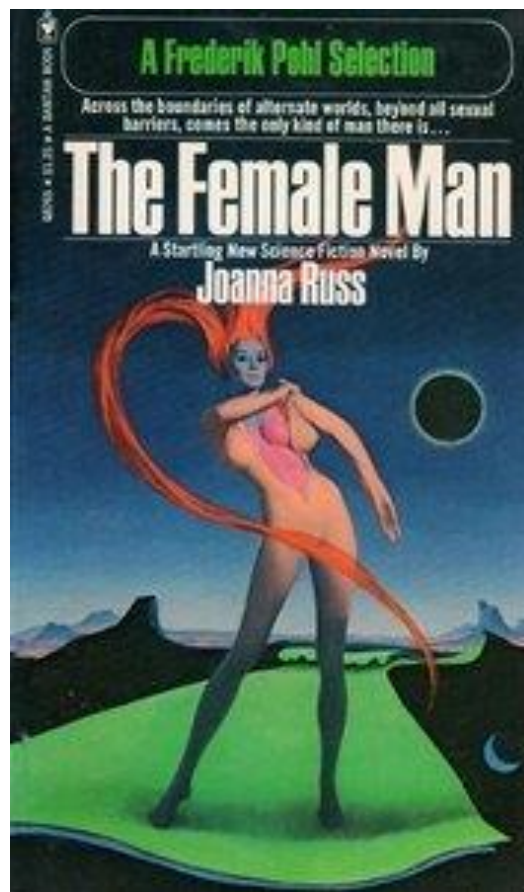
Abstract

The American feminist writer Joanna Russ (1937-2011) finds her way to claim women's position not only in society but also in 'life' in the feminist utopian genre. Her famous work *The Female Man* was hardly the first feminist science fiction novel. It was originally written in 1970 and first published in 1975. Russ creates *While away*, the literary utopian space of *The Female Man*, a world that resembles paradise where no man lives, and where women 'while away their time' and live life their own way. The character Joanna in the novel calls herself the "female man" because she believes that she must forget her identity as a woman in order to be respected. A relatively common motif in speculative fiction is the existence of single-gender worlds or single-sex societies. These fictional societies have long been one of the primary ways

to explore implication of gender-difference in science fiction and fantasy. The novel follows the lives of four women living in parallel worlds that differ in time and place. When they cross over to each other's worlds, their different views on gender roles startle each other's preexisting notions of women hood. In the end, their encounters influence them to evaluate their lives and shape their idea of what it means to be a woman

Keywords: Russ, feminism, gender identity, space, sexual ambiguity

Joanna Russ and Her Novel *The Female Man*



Joanna Russ was an American writer, academic and radical feminist who died after a stroke aged 74, was a unique, thinker as well as a most entertaining and challenging science-fiction novelist. She began publishing in the 1950's, but her feminist concerns did not emerge until the appearance in the late 1960s of her stories about Alyx, a tough-minded and intelligent female assassin from the classical Greek period. Russ herself once said that it was the Alyx stories that gave her the breakthrough in confidence to deal with feminist issues in fiction. She is **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:3 March 2017
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the author of a number of works of science fiction, fantasy and feminist literary criticism such as *How to suppress women's writing*, as well as a contemporary novel, *On Strike against God*, and one children's book, *Kittatinny*. She is best known for *The Female Man*, a novel combining utopian fiction and satire and the story "When it Changed." The female man did not appear until 1975, after publisher delays. She had written it six years earlier, around the time she first publicly declared herself a lesbian.

Gender identity a main theme in this novel is defined as a personal conception of oneself as male or female. This concept is intimately related to the concept of gender role, which is defined as the outward manifestations of personality that reflect the gender identity. Gender identity, in nearly all instances, is self-identified. As a result of a combination of inherent and extrinsic or environmental factors; gender role on the other hand, is manifested within society by observable factors such as behavior and appearance. It cannot be assigned, diagnosed, measured or disapproved by anyone else—a person's gender identity is their own. Attempts to understand the mutual co-production of space and identity have ranged across discussions

.The Feminist Science Fiction

The Female Man was hardly the first feminist science fiction novel. In *The Female Man* Joanna Russ contrasts our present-day heterosexual society with two revolutionary alternatives: a utopian world of women and a dystopian world of women warring with men. *The Female Man*, both science fiction and utopian novel, operates as what Monique Wittig in *The Straight Mind* (hereafter, *SM*) calls a literary "war machine" (69). The goal of such a war machine is "to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions. It is always produced in hostile territory" (*SM* 69). Russ's war machine confronts hostile territory—the heterosexual institutions that regulate gender—in tones that are variously hilarious, furious, and parodic. Her purpose in *The Female Man* is to trick the reader into recognizing the problem of "contrariedades": "You can't unite woman and human any more than you can unite matter and antimatter" (138, 151).

Russ is just as iconoclastic in structuring her narrative as in advancing her arguments. *The Female Man* tosses around protagonists and settings as if they were hot dice in all-night craps game, leaving behind a series of unresolved complications and stranded characters in the

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process. But what seems, at first glance, blatant disorder in the plot eventually morphs into the literary equivalent of theme-and-variations. The novel opens in Manhattan, 1969. A woman named Joanna is intrigued by the headlines she has seen recently: it seems that earth has a visitor from a planet run entirely by women. Joanna doesn't own a TV, so she heads to a cocktail lounge where she can watch a live interview with the blonde, attractive lady alien, whose name is Janet Evason Belin.

Stories in *The Female Man*

The individual stories that constitute *The Female Man* exist in separate time-space continuums, but they bear a family resemblance to each other, as do the various main characters. Let's call them the 4 *J*'s. Jeanine lives in a world much like our own, except for quirky differences in fashion and culture. She is a librarian who wants to get married, but is depressed and exasperated at the potential husbands available to her. Janet is a visitor from a future alternate universe known as Whileaway, where all men died long ago and women created a nomadic pastoral society. The assassin Jael comes from a different alternate future, and can also travel through time; but watch out for this visitor from another world—her home society takes the concept of the 'war between the sexes seriously, very seriously. Not only do Man land and Woman land exist as separate nations, but the ladies are hatching a plan to kill off the fellows. And then, presiding over them all—or at least trying to run the show—is our last J, and the most powerful of them all. Joanna, the author herself, or her fictional alter ego, inserts herself into the various subplots and dialogues, full of motherly advice that the other J's frequently ignore.

Other Female Characters

A few other women have prominent secondary roles in this book. We meet Laura, from the same time-space continuum as Joanna—which may very well be the actual United States, circa 1970—and follow her budding romance with Janet. We get a brief glimpse of Janet's Whileaway wife Vittoria. And, you ask, what about the men? Well, plenty of them show up for cameo appearances, but they are a sad ass group of guys. They are needy and whiny, phoney and bossy, egotistical and domineering. You will hardly care that many don't even get assigned a

name, and won't shed a tear when a few even get assaulted or murdered. In the world of *The Female Man*, this is their comeuppance.

Complexity and Depth of Female Characters

Russ is much better at showing complexity and depth in her female characters. The four J's may all be chips off the same block, but they still bicker among themselves and challenge each other's preconceived notions. At the close of the novel, they overcome their differences (as well as the boundaries between their various places in the space-time continuum) and gather together at a restaurant for a Thanks giving dinner. The food is mediocre, but no one gets murdered here, and no man shows up with a lame pickup line. Instead, the protagonists serve up the trademarks ingredients of Russ's novel, namely pointed dialogue, confession and assertive social commentary. Joanna Russ makes clear that the most radical dissection of gender and sex is, always and everywhere, conceptual and behavioral.

Taking Place in Four Worlds!

The Female Man takes place in four worlds inhabited by four J's, very different women who share the same genotype. Let's call them the 4 J's. Jeanine Dadier lives in a world much like our own, except for quirky differences in fashion and culture. She is a librarian who wants to get married, but is depressed and exasperated at the potential husbands available to her. Janet is a visitor from a future alternate universe known as Whileaway, where all men died long ago and women created a nomadic pastoral society. The assassin Jael comes from a different alternate future, and can also travel through time; but watch out for this visitor from another world—her home society takes the concept of the 'war between the sexes' seriously, very seriously. Not only do Man land and Woman land exist as separate nations, but the ladies are hatching a plan to kill off the fellows. And then, presiding over them all—or at least trying to run the show—is our last J, and the most powerful of them all. Joanna, the author herself, or her fictional alter ego, inserts herself into the various subplots and dialogues, full of motherly advice that the other J's frequently ignore. The novel presents multiple configurations of a visitor-guide utopia: Janet, a visitor to America, is guided by Joanna and Jeannine, who are in turn visitors to Whileaway, guided by Janet. Joanna, Jeannine, and Janet are visitors to Manland and Womanland, guided by

Jael. Jael also visits America and is guided by Jeannine

These narrative shifts not only displace the reader, but on another level they raise the question of the identity of the subjective self. Identity, like the statue on Whileaway, "is a constantly changing contradiction."

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the relation between gender and identity and argues: "It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (16).

Gender and Identity

Although gender and identity are ineluctably intertwined in *The Female Man*, this paper sets aside questions of identity in order to focus on how the "standards of gender intelligibility" in "our world" are contrasted with and undermined by Russ's two alternative worlds and how language is deployed as the ultimate weapon to destroy "standards of gender intelligibility." The category of sex and the straight mind are found in the worlds of Jeannine and Joanna, which is unsurprising because their worlds are very similar to ours. Women in *The Female Man* are objectified as sex objects. For instance, Joanna says, "After we had finished making love, he turned to the wall and said, 'Woman, you're lovely. You're sensuous. You should wear long hair and Joanna reverses *Non Sum* by becoming a man, a female man. She cryptically hints at this several times (§1.5:5, §2.2:19-20) before she explains it: "I'll tell you how I turned into a man. First I had to turn into a woman" (§7.1: 133). As Simone de Beauvoir says in the *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but becomes a woman" (249).

Joanna explains that she becomes a man as a consequence of "the knowledge you suffer when you're an outsider.... the perception of all experience through two sets of eyes, two systems of value, two habits of expectation, almost two minds" (§7.2:137-38). In other words, she must constantly be aware not only of the universal male, but also of the female Other.⁸ Thus, she becomes a female man: "To resolve contrarities, unite them in your own person" (138). Become

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your own universal. She says, "Manhood, children, is not reached by courage or short hair or insensibility.... Manhood, children, ... *is Manhood*" (§2.2:20). A woman reaches "manhood" by appropriating language.

Joanna's change into a female man appears magical, but then, so does the appropriation of language and this—not the ultimate suppression of men, but the short-term declaration "that women are human"—is Joanna's solution to the dilemma of "unit[ing] woman and human" (§7.5:151). She becomes a "man" because man is the universal; man is human. She says, "If we are all Mankind [i.e., human], then it follows to my interested and righteous and right now [sic] very bright and beady little eyes, that I too am a Man and not at all a woman" (§7.2:140).

Jeannine doesn't evolve as much as Joanna. Jeannine works in New York City as a reference librarian for the WPA (§1.2:2). In her world of 1969, World War II never occurred and the Great Depression and rationing linger over America. Gender roles are more strictly inscribed in Jeannine's world than in ours, which accounts for her concern with her feminine appearance (she checks lines around her eyes and worries about her age, for instance) and her obsession with getting married. She is badgered by her mother who wants the answer to "the really important question, viz., is Jeannine going to have a kitchenette of her own" (§6.10:127), and her brother, who tells her to marry "Anybody" (§6.4:116). She has a lover, Cal, but she really doesn't like him and tries to avoid him because he will "want to Make Love" (§1.10:16). She daydreams that a prince will whisk her away (§6.1:109), but after a few blind dates ends up calling Cal and telling him the answer is yes to the marriage question he's been asking (§6.9:129-31).

Jeannine's straight mind questions even slight deviations from the heterosexual norm. For instance, Jeannine asks Joanna whether there's "something wrong" with Cal because "when he does it [makes love], you know, sometimes he cries. I never heard of a man doing that" (84), and because "He can't make up his mind, either. I never heard of a man like that" (85), and most of all, because Sometimes—sometimes—he likes to get *dressed up*. He gets into the drapes like a sarong and puts on all my necklaces around his neck, and stands there with the curtain rod for a spear. He wants to be an actor, you know. But I think there's something wrong with him. Is it what they call transvestism? (§5.2:85)

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Jeannine and Joanna

Unlike Joanna, who becomes a female man and a lesbian¹⁰ by the end of the novel, Jeannine does not completely reject the straight mind but evolves only to the point of questioning it. She recognizes the myth of Woman and the necessity of feminist politics. She now gets up late and neglects housework; she is doing just as she pleases, which doesn't happen to coincide with the myth of Woman (§9.7:209-12). Russ compares the solutions Joanna and Jeannine reach to the alternative worlds of Janet and Jael. Though these two worlds further critique and undermine the straight mind, they fail to conclusively demonstrate a final victory. Janet's world of Whileaway is merely a hope and Jael's world is a parody. Janet comes from Whileaway, an all-women, anarchist society (§5.7:91). The men on Whileaway were wiped out by a plague (§1.8:14), thus, women are (naturally) lesbians and have children through gene splicing. They marry but are not monogamous and have sexual relations primarily outside the family (52, 53). Janet's visit to America inevitably leads to reversals that undermine the straight mind.

For instance, when Janet is interviewed on television, the M.C. presumptuously asks how Whileaway will react to the reappearance of men. Janet cannot imagine "why" men should reappear. She keeps asking "why," until the M.C. finally tells her, "One sex is half a species" (§1.7:9-10). Janet does not comprehend this, of course, because on Whileaway one sex is the whole species. This is the reversal of universality: on Whileaway females are the universal. When Janet lands on Jeannine's world, she asks, "Where the dickens are all the women?" (§1.7:8). Similarly, although Whileawayan children are given the last name of their mother plus "son" (Janet's last name is Evason), Janet tells us "Evason is not 'son' but 'daughter.' This is *your* translation" (§1.15:18).

Heterosexuality

Another reversal is that of heterosexuality. On Whileaway women are lesbians and bear children, so they have no reproductive need for men and no concept of heterosexuality. Because of this, when the three other J's watch Jael have sex with her male robot, Davy, Janet exclaims, "'Good Lord? Is *that* all?'" (§8.14:198). Although one critic suggests Janet's exclamation shows that "sex between a person and a dehumanized object is not—and should not be regarded as

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being—highly significant" (Spector 201), this interpretation ignores the obvious parallel to the possible dehumanization of women in heterosexual sex between "real men" and "real women." I've never slept with a girl. I couldn't. I wouldn't want to. That's abnormal and I'm not, although you can't be normal unless you do what you want and you can't be normal unless you love men. To do what I wanted would be normal, unless what I wanted was abnormal, in which case it would be abnormal to please myself and normal to do what I didn't want to do, which isn't normal. (§4.11:68)

Although Whileaway's all-women (lesbian) society undermines gender relations in heterosexual society, it also raises the problem of separatism. In "Recent Feminist Utopias" (1981), in which Russ discusses feminist science fiction including *The Female Man*, Russ comments: "I believe the separatism is primary, and...the authors are not subtle in their reasons for creating separatist utopias: if men are kept out of these societies, it is because men are dangerous. They also hog the good things of this world" (77). The purpose of utopias, she further remarks, is to "supply in fiction what their authors believe society...and/or women, lack in the here-and-now. The positive values stressed in the stories can reveal to us what, in the authors' eyes, is wrong with our own society" (81). And while the all-woman/lesbian society of Whileaway is the utopia in *The Female Man*, it cannot evade the problem of origin. How do we get there? The men of Whileaway were wiped out by a plague that attacked only men (§1.8:12).¹³ This is obviously not a realistic way to destroy the heterosexual institutions that regulate gender. Moreover, as Butler points out, a "utopian notion of a sexuality freed from heterosexual constructs...fail[s] to acknowledge the ways in which power relations continue to construct sexuality for women even within the terms of a 'liberated' heterosexuality or lesbianism" (29). Despite these problems, Whileaway nonetheless critiques and undermines the straight mind, a point Jean Pfaelzer makes when she says that a utopia "deconstructs our assumptions about social inevitability through representations that provoke a cognitive dissonance between the present as lived and the potentialities hidden within it. Utopias tempt us as an evocation of political desire" (199). As Russ admits at the end of the novel, "Janet [is one] whom we don't believe in and whom we deride but who is in secret our savior from utter despair" (§9.7:212-13). Whileaway, like any other utopia, represents our hope.

Jael's World

Jael's world, on the other hand, represents our fear. Hers is a dystopian world in which men live in Manland, separated from women in Womanland. For forty years a war has been waged between the "Haves" and "Have-nots," the men and women (§8.6:164-65). Manlanders have more technology, but they have no women so they buy babies from the Womanlanders (§8.7:167). On Manland there are real-men, the changed (men surgically changed into "women"), and the half-changed ("who keep their genitalia but who grow slim, grow languid, grow emotional and feminine, all this the effect of spirit only" [ibid.]). Womanland has no men, but does have male robots, such as Jael's Davy, "The most beautiful man in the world" (§8.9:185). Jael herself is part robot (a cyborg) with surgical claws and steel teeth hidden under plates that look like human teeth (§8.7:181-82).

The women who dress like men and the men who dress like women are parodies of "an original or primary gender identity Anna and Natalie's feminine dress and coy behavior and Jael's posturing as Prince of Faery parody male and female gender roles, thus suggesting how gender roles are indeterminate and contingent. This parody of a parody is mirrored in the sex specifications the Womanlanders give the Manlanders for their sex change operations. No "real woman" exists behind the fantastic specifications. As Jael tells the other three J's, "[*Manlanders have*]been separated from real women so long that they don't know what to make of us; I doubt if even the sex surgeons know what a real woman looks like. The specifications we send them every year grow wilder and wilder and there isn't a murmur of protest" (§8.7:169).

Jael's world, which merely substitutes "Other" for "One," is not a viable solution to the heterosexual institutions that oppress women. Jael's world undermines heterosexual institutions through parody, just as Whileaway's lesbian society undermines heterosexual institutions by demonstrating the false nature of the categories of sex. But even the utopian Whileaway is not the final victory for women. *The Female Man* ultimately relies on the power of language to reappropriate the universal and thus fulfills Wittig's criteria for a successful war machine: "It is the attempted universalization of the point of view that turns or does not turn a literary work into a war machine" (*SM* 75).

Rejection of Femininity

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The most explicit rejection of femininity, though, comes again in the section dealing with Jael's world, where men and women live in separate enclaves. The men still enforce patriarchy, which means they need someone to dominate—and so some men dress as and are surgically altered to perform as women. Russ' disdain and disgust at "the changed" isn't especially subtle. "The official ideology has it that women are poor substitutes for the changed," she writes. "I certainly hope so." Though the changed are of course not real, they are clearly meant as analogues for transwomen; who are figured as deceived, disgusting, pitiable dupes of patriarchy.

Even though Russ says, "I like Jael the best of all.... who says die if you must but loop your own intestines around the neck of your strangling enemy" (§9.7:212), Joanna is the hero of the novel and Joanna's change into the female man shows that for all women, change into the female man is possible through language. Through language women can kill the myth of woman and abolish the class of women (and the class of men). Like Jael, women can yell "I, I, I. Repeat it like magic" (§8.10:195), and in this way attempt to universalize their point of view. *The Female Man* suggests that women can "*speak* their way out of their gender" (Butler 117). Although the conclusion of this battle is not clear-cut, the novel provides strategy and hope. Appropriately, Russ ends with an envoi: "Go little book...." and "Do not get glum when you are no longer understood.... Rejoice, little book! For on that day, we will be free"

A Milestone Event in the History of Science Fiction

Russ's book stands out as a milestone event in the history of science fiction. The boldness and bravado of the dialectic in her book—more than half of this novel is devoted to ideology and cultural critique—made this an unusual work, even during an age in which sci-fi authors increasingly addressed social and political topics in their stories. And when plot and character development do move to the forefront of *The Female Man*, they clearly serve to advance an agenda. Russ certainly wants to entertain her readers, but she is even more committed to persuading them, and that preference is felt on almost every page of *The Female Man*.

Russ is much better at showing complexity and depth in her female characters. The four J's may all be chips off the same block, but they still bicker among themselves and challenge each other's preconceived notions. At the close of the novel, they overcome their differences (as

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well as the boundaries between their various places in the space-time continuum) and gather together at a restaurant for a thanks giving dinner. The food is mediocre, but no one gets murdered here, and no man shows up with a lame pickup line. Instead, the protagonists serve up the trademarks ingredients of Russ's novel ,namely pointed dialogue, confession and assertive social commentary.

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