

## **Science Fiction and the Others: A Study of Representation of Minorities in *X-Men***

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### **Abstract:**

Ever since its inception, Science Fiction (SF) has known to be ahead of its time. As the name suggests, the genre, by default is oxymoronic in nature. It deals with narratives which are not likely to be non-true in given plausible settings. Also, the genre has evolved over the years to address relevant issues in the contemporary society by presenting not just a reflection *of* the society but also a reflection *on* the society (Suvin). This paper aims to chart the development of SF over the years and simultaneously examine how the genre addresses the notion of otherisation. In doing so, *X-Men*, an SF film series will be examined to see how SF engages with different forms of the Others vis-à-vis mutants and how *X-Men*, if at all does, challenge presumptions about the Others who act as a metaphor for different minorities in society.

**Keywords:** Science Fiction, SF, Others, X-Men, Otherisation.

The basic model on which Science Fiction (SF) functions, that is, science and/or technology (real or imagined in a plausible setting), is as such ever evolving by nature. This implies that something that can be a subject of wild speculation in a given time and space, might become, due to advancement in science and technology, a “real” subject in an alternative space and time. For instance, for someone reading or/and writing a work of SF a couple of decades back, the pros and cons of supercomputers or smartphones would be something probable in future but for us it is a living situation.

This calls for understanding the nature (if not a definition) of SF for it remains in a state of flux, there are no fixed categories. The moment we define it, it redefines itself, the moment we understand it, we misunderstand it. In his work “On the Origins of Genre”, Paul Kincaid has famously argued that there is no “urtext” of SF, no fixed definition, no given starting point to which its readers, writers and critics agree upon unanimously. Each of these readers, writers and critics “choose whichever best suit our [their] conceptions of science fiction, and change those choices (or devise new ones) as our [their] conceptions

change” (412). He further adds, whenever one talks about SF, one is using a kind of “private language” for each person determines his/her conceptions from a personal understanding.

Darko Suvin in *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction* underlines that SF is “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to author’s empirical environment” (7-8). He further mentions that this theory should not be limited to a reflection of the author’s cognitive world but transcend into a “dynamic creative transformation” of the same, that is, “not only a reflection of reality but also on reality” (10). Furthermore, “SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of fictional novum (novelty, innovation) validated by logic . . . . A novum of cognitive innovation is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s implied reader’s norm of reality” (63-64).

Taking from Kincaid and Suvin, I am of an opinion that both reader and author’s cognition of their immediate space and time is of much relevance in understanding what SF means to them. My worldview will define my understanding of SF, it might not align with the worldview of someone reading or writing a work of SF and/or reading or writing about SF in some other time and space.

Farah Mendlesohn, in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* underlined that the titles of the SF magazines in the initial years followed a similar pattern, almost suggesting the content to be full of “Amazing, Astounding, Thrilling Wonder” narratives providing a “sense of wonder” (3). On being encountered by narratives imbued with expansive fascination promoting speculation, one feels a sense of wonder while reading and/or watching a work of SF. Such narratives which revolve around speculation weaved around a fictional account began much earlier than twentieth century (when SF bloomed as a genre).

After renaissance, many writers started writing about the discoveries of the new world, often discussing the impact (positive and negative) of inventions and developments around the world. Such narratives marked the beginning of utopian and dystopian speculative fiction, dealing with the possible alternative futures. Further, as the world started witnessing developments in the field of science and technology, many writers sought to expand the “sense of wonder” leading to scientific romance.

The publication of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) stirred the readers already familiar with established Gothic genre which came into light after William Horace’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764). With Shelley’s work, a hybrid of gothic and romance paved way for the (anti) science fiction narrative, relating the inimical effects of overarching (mis) use of science and technology. Towards the close of nineteenth century, writers like H. G. Wells shaped scientific romance which featured narratives about time travel, encounters with extra-terrestrials, space travel, human evolution, etc.

Towards the mid of twentieth century, the world started witnessing rapid growth in science and technology. In addition, the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-Vietnam War in the U.S paved way for change in conception and reception of SF where

in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a few prestigious literary figures proposed that SF had a special role in revealing the social unconscious of the postwar world . . . Most influential of all was Leslie Fiedler's "The New Mutants" (1965). Fiedler, a bold revisionist of American Studies, argued that US literature was energised by the conscious disavowal, and unconscious affirmation, of the stigmatised Other. Inspired by the psychoanalytic critique of American conformism of the 1950s, Fiedler submitted the American canon to Freudian analysis, detecting repression of racial and sexual fears throughout. Using the work of William S. Burroughs (who would later become the tutelary genius of the cyberpunks) as his model, Fiedler believed recent fiction signalled that the denied Others of American society were freeing themselves. For Fiedler, SF was a genre quintessentially expressing the consciousness of the "freaks," marginalised bohemians, hippies, Jews and Blacks (significantly, not women) that SF writers characteristically displaced into superheroes, mutants, and aliens. (Csicsery-Ronay 51)

Further, the dawn of twentieth century had paved way for the breakthrough of the emerging genre with the advent of pulp magazines. In "Science Fiction Before the Genre", Brian Stableford noted "the ready availability in the USA of cheap paper made from wood pulp encouraged the rapid growth of 'pulp magazines' specializing in garish melodramas, which inherited the commercial genres identified by the dime novels" (29). These magazines popularised stories roughly framed on the model of scientific romance of the previous century.

It is widely known that Hugo Gernsback pioneered what he called as "scientifiction" magazine, *Amazing Stories* (1926), marking the beginning of the magazine era (1926-60). During Gernsback's timespan, many similar works appeared in the form of novels, short stories, movies, etc., but the overarching presence of pulp magazines made the era known as the magazine era.

Magazines were widely circulated amongst the subscribed users. As Brian Attebery recorded in "The Magazine Era: 1926-1960", *Amazing Stories* became one of the most remarkable magazines for it started featuring diverse narratives and also attempted to "define the genre which the editor initially called 'scientifiction,' but began to refer to as 'science fiction' by 1929" (33). So, initially, the magazine era began with a touch of scientific romance which developed into "scientifiction" under Gernsback's venture. Ultimately, the term "scientifiction" was taken over by the term "science fiction" which matured during the next phase of the magazine era.

Gradually, the market started flooding with numerous pulp magazines, even after the slow demise of the *Amazing Stories*. Around 1937, the advent of *Astounding Science-Fiction* (earlier known as *Astounding Stories*) edited by John W. Campbell marked the beginning of the second phase of the magazine era, popularly known as the Golden Age of Science Fiction. During this period, the writers focused upon scientific accuracy followed by logic and reasoning, due to which a new term entered the vocabulary, known as Hard Science Fiction.

In addition, stories based on advancements in technology underlining its possible threats on human population were widespread and space operas, interactions with aliens, inventions such as artificial intelligence, etc., surfaced the market. However, in “New Wave and Backwash: 196-1980”, Damien Broderick accounted that the magazine era started fading towards the end of 1940s, leading to an intermediary phase before the beginning of “the emergent movement, a reaction against genre exhaustion but never quite formalised and often repudiated by its major exemplars, came to be known as the New Wave, adapting French cinema’s *nouvelle vague*” (49).

A magazine called the *New Worlds* edited by Michael Moorcock appeared from 1964 to 1973, encompassed the spirit of the New Wave. In his work “Science Fiction/Criticism”, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., mentioned that this era represented “the first serious mutation of SF magazine culture” divorcing it from the popular trends influenced by the market demands. Also, the works started following “contemporary literary styles” unlike the science fiction of preceding eras. This change was facilitated by one of the most renowned writers of the *New Worlds*, J. G. Ballard who ideated a re-envision of science fiction “as a genre exploring psychological ‘inner space’” and denounced a fix with outer space with respect to the changing trends in the society (49).

Post 1960s, as SF had started following the “contemporary literary styles”, many theorists and critics started reflecting upon the genre amidst academic spheres. For instance, Kingsley Amis’ lectures on SF, *New Maps of Hell* (1960) explored the growth of the genre and paved way for Darko Suvin’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), a work on theory and criticism of SF.

Over a decade, the readership of the genre fluctuated and by late the twentieth century, the *Cyberpunk* stories which revolved around artificial intelligence and cybernetics achieved raging popularity. Thereafter, cyberpunk movies such as *The Matrix* (1999) opened avenues for mainstream SF movies, leading to the release of the first instalment of the *X-Men* franchise in 2000.

In order to read movies like *X-Men* as a work of SF, it is important to locate the novum and understand it in relation to the author and reader’s cognitive environment so as to have the kind of “totalizing phenomenon” of estrangement made intelligible via the very novum. “As a consequence, the essential tension of SF is one between the readers, representing a certain types of Man of our times, and encompassing or at least equipollent Unknown or Other introduced by the novum” (Suvin 64).

The Other can be understood as someone or something except someone or something already central to any discourse. Else, the Other can be understood as someone or something essentially different from Self. In SF, the Other can be understood on two levels: literal and metaphorical. On the former plane, the presence of the Other can be in the form of an alien, zombie, mutant, artificial intelligence, etc. Here, the Other suffices anything that does not align with the idea of Self, human self, per se. Whereas, on a metaphorical plane, the presence of the Other could be a strategy to comment upon different systems of oppression which tend to otherise the minorities.

I would like to examine the *X-Men* series in order to understand what debates SF manages to highlight with respect to the position of the Others in the contemporary society. To begin with, *X-Men* narrative revolves around the lives of mutants (evolved species of Homo sapiens) and their struggles where the former represents the Others in a society dominated by the humans. Following the discussions and debates on the representation of the Others in *X-Men*, P. Andrew Miller in “Mutants, Metaphor, and Marginalism: What X-Actly Do the X-Men Stand For?”, professed that, “the X-Men and mutants in general can be seen as metaphors for any number of minority or marginal” (283).

Over the years, many scholars have tried to study the underlying patterns of race, gender, religion, etc., in the light of the mutant metaphor. I believe that a close examination of the series is required to analyse and possibly revise the mutant metaphor in relation to the contemporary concerns in society which remain largely ignored by the mainstream media.

One of the co-creators of X-Men, Stan Lee stated, “so many people have told me that they get the symbolism of oppressed minority and how terrible it is that people are intolerant of other people who have differences in some way” (*Stan Lee Comments on X-Men* 07:10-07:30).

As I wish to discuss the representation of otherisation in SF, I believe that *X-Men* is just the right choice as the Other (usually pushed to the margins) is put at the centre of the discourse to reclaim the marginality.

Also, by portraying the Other as a mutant or in other words, as an evolved species of Homo sapiens, the creators have elided the risk of dehumanising what the Other represents, that is the minorities. For an excessive divorce from the human race could insinuate the dehumanisation of the Other. So, kudos to Stan Lee’s idea of creating these mutants who possess superpowers as a result of genetic mutation as it posited that the mutants are basically evolved human beings (very much “normal” but different) as a result of gene-X found in their DNA.

Moreover, such representations help the audience to comprehend and analyse the situation objectively as the Other is altogether a different species, so the audience can be expected to be unbiased while reflecting on the narrative which in fact is a reflection of the society. In addition, as mutants, their life and its struggles are at the heart of the plot, *X-Men* aims to subvert the norms of hierarchy without making any shift in the societal centre.

Further, in *X-Men*, the understanding of the Other can be twofold: firstly, the mutants who have yet not become the norm in the society, they are different from the status quo, as a result the Other. And secondly, the humans perceived as the Other (by some mutants) as they are relatively less evolved. Also, it must be noted that the mutants know and understand that the society is dominated by humankind, they could, as many of them do, take advantage of their superpowers to fight the humans or else strive for peace and equality in the society.

Since the beginning of the narrative, it is made evident that in a world dominated by humans, mutants represent the minority, that is, the Other at the receiving end of the

former's bigotry and prejudice. On the surface, the narrative revolves around mutants' fight for equal rights and representation in the society. Beyond the manifest discourse, the dynamics of a mutant-human society evoke the themes of essentialism, elitism and prejudice leading to xenophobia. Further, it mirrors certain issues ever present in the society such as racism, sexism, ableism, etc.

It is also pronounced that mutants' existence does not revolve around saving the world from supervillains or extra-terrestrials but to fight for their share of the world, for equality and freedom. However, some of the mutants, say, the X-Men do care about protecting humans from "evil" mutants. Also, there exist mutants, in groups and as individuals, who have waged war against humans due to nonchalant human attitude towards the relatively evolved-different species. And there are some mutants who do not align with either ideology and are just hiding amidst the human society, either due to the fear of prosecution or for leading a "normal" life. These mutants are divided by their values and beliefs, for they are scattered across the globe, mostly hiding for the fear of being identified and mistreated at the hands of humans.

Besides the X-Men team, the Brotherhood of Mutants is run by Charles' former friend Erik Lehnsherr aka Magneto who believes that mutants need to unite and wage war against humans in order to take over. Once Charles' associate, Erik has had his share of bitter experiences with humans, as a result he does not believe in Charles' ideals whose team of mutants, the X-Men are socially responsible mutants seeking to establish a world of peace and equality.

Now that the background of the *X-Men* is established along with the fact that all mutants are not the X-Men, I would like to analyse the aforementioned moniker. The series pronounced that the presence of gene X in the mutant DNA could be one of the reasons for being called so or because of being the comrades or students of Charles Xavier aka Professor X, the friend, philosopher and guide of young mutants.

I must admit, the title provides a sense of exclusivity and is ironical to the larger theme of inclusivity of minorities. Lee mentioned that the publishers would not allow the use of the term "mutant" in the title as it was an unfamiliar term back then, but after several decades of its initial inception, the audience and the fans are well aware of the term and what it stands for, it would be fairly inclusive to use the same instead of using the restricted title. Despite certain shortcomings in the representation of the Others, ventures like *X-Men* help in initiating a dialogue on several relevant issues and possibly open new avenues for further debate and discussions.

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