

Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*: claiming feminism and sexuality across utopian communities

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Resumen

La escritora feminista Americana Joanna Russ (1937-2011) encuentra la fórmula de reclamar el lugar de la mujer no solo en la sociedad sino también en 'la vida' dentro del género feminista utópico. Es por lo tanto nuestro objetivo ahondar en el análisis de la obra cumbre y seña de identidad de la autora, *The Female Man* (1975), como novela feminista de ciencia ficción de la década de los setenta y en particular discernir hasta qué punto la distopía y la utopía entran en juego en su obra, y la forma en que la identidad de género juega su papel en comunidades formadas únicamente por mujeres. En este sentido, en un elogio aparente al 'héroe varón' y de su superioridad ante la mujer, y abordando ambigüedades sexuales, 'hombre hembra, mujer varón', Russ reivindica ingeniosamente su lugar en la sociedad americana. Por último, destacar que según su teoría del 'rescate de la niña hembra', brinda una alternativa para educar a la mujer joven adolescente fuera del patriarcado superprotector, permitiéndola entrar en la vida adulta libremente y sin ataduras.

Palabras clave: feminism, utopia/dystopia, ciencia ficción, ambigüedad de sexo, identidad de género.

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. It is therefore our aim to delve into the analysis of the author's hallmark, *The Female Man* (1975), as a feminist science-fictional novel of the 1970s and in particular discern to what extent utopia and dystopia are at stake, and how gender identity plays its role in only-women communities. In this sense, Russ wittily claims women's place in US society by an apparent praise of the 'hero male' and its superiority in front of the women and dealing with sexual ambiguities, 'female man, male woman'. Finally, mentioning how, according to her theory of 'the rescue of the female girl', she affords an alternative to young women education out

of the frame of the overprotective and controlling patriarchy allowing the adolescent girl to move into a full and free opening to adulthood.

Keywords: feminism, utopia/dystopia, science fiction, sexual ambiguity, gender identity

Along the dense and complex literary production of the American feminist writer Joanna Russ, it is not uncommon to make out how intense and persisting her main issues of concern are. Either in *The Female Man* (1975), *Picnic on Paradise* (1976 (included in the fiction series published in 1983, *The Adventures of Alyx*), or even in her more autobiographical and unmasking life story *On Strike against God* (1980), the reader is shaken with paints of irony, sarcasm and anger when dealing with sex roles, sex ambiguity, and gender identity. In this same line, when walking across other feminist works, we realize that the idea of an only-female world has been one of the main utopias along the 1970s (even though as far back as the ancient Greek mythology, amazons embodied strong all-female communities).

As Russ states in her critical essay *Recent Feminist Utopias*¹, “I finished *The Female Man* in 1971 [...] It saw publication in 1975 [...]” She also notes that utopian science fiction² served women writers in their struggle: “The women’s movement that first flowered in 1970s had its repercussions in science fiction as it had in so many other literary and extra-literary areas in the United States” (Russ, 1995: 133). In this article, we will therefore aim at delving into the author’s hallmark as a feminist science-fictional novel of the 1970s, and particularly trying to discern to what extent utopia and dystopia are at stake, and how gender identity plays its role in only-women communities. In order to do that, we will first deal with the feminist science fictional aspects that are managed within the utopian genre in Russ’s literary universe, and how procreation, sexual permissiveness and ambiguity are justified in only-women communities, and take part of the feminist utopias. In Russ’s stories, women turn into heroines and female rescuers who save the young girl by pulling her out of the patriarchal society, thus providing them with the same social opportunities as boys. Following Russ’s critical essay “Recent Feminist Utopias” (1995), in utopian societies such as those in Ursula K. Leguin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), James Tiptree’s *Houston, Houston, Can you read?* (1976) and her own novel *The Female Man* (1975), only-women communities are classless, ecology-minded, politically and socially ungoverned

¹*Recent Feminist Utopias* was first published in *Future Females: A Critical Anthology* (Marleen S. Barr, 1981). For the sake of this article, we will choose the version appearing in her collection of critical essays *To Write like a Woman* published in 1995.

²The first time should be used Science Fiction, but from now onwards SF will be used instead.

and sexually permissive (i.e. homosexuality, heterosexuality, promiscuity). The latter was very familiar to the radical feminist movement implying “[..] not to break taboos but to separate sexuality from questions of ownership, reproduction and social structure” (1995: 139). As we will deal with later in the article, men are not essential procreators, although in some ‘female’ communities, women still needed them. In the utopian genre of 1970s, reproduction is taken for granted among women and scientific advances received greatest predominance over a sexual vision of women and phallic display shown by man writers (Russ, 1995). In this same line of self-sufficient only-women societies, we should stretch back to the 19th century story *Mizora* (1880) created by Mary E. Bradley Lane in which a utopian world is found by Vera Zarovitch a Russian noblewoman who was exiled to Siberia. When escaping from her exile she travels north by ship and reaches Mizora, an inner world she discovers going down into the earth through an ‘opening’ in the pole (i.e. the intriguing hollow Earth literary topic of Lane’s time). Once in the new society, Vera finds an enlightened female society living in perfect harmony, where inhabitants are blessed with advanced technologies. In parallel, Russ creates *Whileaway*, the literary utopian space of *The Female Man*³, a world that resembles the paradise where no man lives, and where women ‘while away their time’ and live life their own way. The precursor of TFM is *When It Changed* (1972), for which Russ received the Nebula Award for the best short story the same year of its publication. In both TFM and *When It Changed*, Russ presents a new SF only-women community by dealing with the same traditional issues as male writers have long done: futuristic settings, science and technology, time and space travel, extra-temporal agents, parallel universes and extraterrestrial life. In exploring the potential consequences of scientific and other innovations, she tells an unconventional story of a reinvented community about their own concerns ‘in a woman’s mouth’. Not a story, as Russ⁴ states, about ‘busty girls in wisps of chiffon who slink about writhing with lust’, but one of a new community identity or female society willing to reinvent itself through a new story.

As far as feminism is concerned, gently is not a precise and adequate form of describing Joanna Russ’s feminist production. Rather, by using an abruptly and amazingly controversial style, and in occasions with paints of humor, she introduces wars, aggressions and assassinations either in the narration or just by external events influencing the story (i.e. killing men off in a plague). TFM develops intricately through a

³The first time should be used *The Female Man* and from now onwards it will be replaced with TFM for short.

⁴In the afterword to *When It Changed*, Joanna Russ refers ironically to the representation of women by male writers.

complex plot structure, built up by encounters of different patterns of women: teenage women, frustrated wives and daughters, intellectual academic women, all intermingled with future science-fictional heroines or rescuers and men-like women, all of them playing in an unsteady mosaic-like story. Before cutting deep into Russ's feminism, we find necessary to refer to the different historical periods. The first moments of feminism in Europe and USA or the so-called first feminist 'wave' would date back to the context arisen from the industrial society and liberal politics. Connected to both the liberal women's rights movement and early socialist feminism in the late 19th and early 20th century, feminism is involved in issues such as access and equal opportunities for women (Kroloke, 2006). In Europe, a significant and crucial precursor of the European women struggle for feminism support was Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), publishing in 1792 her treatise "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" who, following the outbreak of the French Revolution (1789-1799), stated that men and women are essentially the same:

...considering woman as a whole, let it be what it will, instead of a part of man, the inquiry is whether she have reason or not. If she have, which, for a moment, I will take for granted, she was not created merely to be the solace of man, and the sexual should not destroy the human character. (1792: 132)

She further suggested that the roles played by the two sexes are largely constructed by society and by the highly contrasted bringing up exerted by the family, "for girls, from various causes, are more kept down by their parents, in every sense of the world, than boys" (1792: 405). In this line, and connected to what Wollstonecraft points out on patriarchy and sexual permissiveness, Joanna Russ (1995) retakes it by proposing the rescue of the female girl. Whereas feminist SF writers rescue the female girl by offering an alternative model of female puberty, Margaret Atwood (1939-) and Saul Bellow (1915-2005) rescue the female child's stolen story created by Russ. Being a story framed in patriarchal spheres, it relates that the adult woman functions as an alien or a stranger in relation to her society, where she is separated from her childhood, and is socially silenced. This way, she will not be able to exert any power in the construction of feminist futures. (Barr, 1993)

Back to the different historical moments of feminism, the second is known as 'the second wave' that emerged in postwar Western welfare societies during the 1960s and 1970s. As Krolokke describes, "It is closely linked to the radical voices of women's empowerment [...] and is a particular moment of differential rights, where sex and gender are highly emphasized providing a sociological or cultural explanation (2006: 14). These were very fruitful decades for the feminist SF tradition, including authors such as Joanna Russ (1937-

2011), James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon's pseudonym, (1915-1987)) or Marge Piercy (1936-). Short after such intense breaking feminist periods, the following 1980s and 1990s decades were differentiated periods crucially identified with a trend of third-world and color women movements.

In an attempt to give response to the influence dystopian elements did have on Russ's literature, we find highly necessary to discern the dichotomy between utopia and dystopia. In order to grasp the concept of dystopia, therefore, we need to understand what utopia means, as the former comes from the latter. Etymologically speaking, *utopia* comes from the Greek words /ου/ 'no' and /τοπος/ 'place', meaning no-place, or non-existent place. However, the literary *eutopia* 'no' turns into 'good' /ευ/, and refers to some imaginary and perfect world where we can live in harmony: "Classless, without government, ecologically minded, with a strong feeling for the natural world, quasi-tribal in feeling and quasi-familial in structure, the societies of these stories are sexually permissive..." (Russ, 1995: 139). Although in these imaginary places a solid political and social structure does not exist, communities are ruled according with the needs of its inhabitants, where resources are sufficient for subsistence and no internal or external wars exist: "The Anarresti of the Dispossessed are anarchists; their communities recall in flavor the Israeli kibbutz" (1995: 136).

Mary Snodgrass's *Encyclopedia of Utopian Literature* (1995: 523) describes utopia as an imaginary golden period; it is the arrival in a paradisiacal isle, valley, planet, isolated shelter, or perfect world. Such a paradise would be built by a scientist, philosopher, and pastoral writer, religious member or economy visionary, essayist, traveler or novel writer. Snodgrass (1995: 204) adds also different habitual elements in the utopian literature, such as abundance of natural resources, humans' good intentions, the development of social hierarchies, technological breakthroughs, the improvement and depuration of the political system, a peaceful environment, and place and time remoteness. In this line, TFM diverts from the comprehensive utopian essence in an attempt to contribute for the feminist intentional 'improvement'. As Russ (1995: 136) explains to support her ideal society: "The societies portrayed in these tales, with one exception, are communal, even quasi-tribal. Government does not exist". She further says, "The stories' classlessness obviously comments on the insecurity, competitiveness, and poverty of a class society" (1995: 145). However, in her utopia, wars exist as a way to either destroy or give birth to new utopian or dystopian societies. As we have mentioned at the beginning of the article, TFM's utopian world is *Whileaway*, "a women-only planet whose men have been killed in a plague thirty generations earlier" (Albinsky, 1988: 159). It is a place where nature is reinforced into a

feminist 'ecological mind', stressing a feeling of harmony and connection with the natural world.

In order to construct a dystopian or anti-utopian world of difficult, dark and terrible future, utopian, or better, eutopian objectives are reversed. As described by Nan Bowman Albinski in Chapter 3, 'When it Changed' of *Women's Utopias in British and American Fiction*, "A new awareness has entered the dystopias, which differ in every detail from *eutopias*. Rigidly hierarchical, totalitarian, militaristic, sexually repressive, patriarchal, set in cities alienated from the natural world" (1988: 161). From this description a dystopian world is found out to work as if it were a contact lens making visible the contemporary defects and shortcomings of a society and humankind. It is a world that represents the negative side of the perfect world, the paradise corrupted by the perversion of principles and political theories, or by a simple tyranny and power hunger. Following Snodgrass (1995: 74), a dystopian world is born as a criticism against corruption of the curse of society, and in this line, it turns out essential to travel back to the Renaissance to find dystopian elements in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). In the 18th century, Jonnathan Swift represents the genre, parodying the social and political features in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and it is such a parody style what leads towards the dystopia genre in the following centuries. In the 19th century, as Angel Galdón points out (2011: 50-51), Samuel Butler's *Erewhom* (1872) is another adventure book considered to initiate the dystopian subject matter in terms of the author exercising a heartless criticism on society, exerting a social satire based on hypocrisy, morality fainting, cultural poverty of modern society, children education, religion, assassination and working environment. In the late 19th century, H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) leads us to travel across the dystopian literature characterized by two key elements: the argument development which is based on a future and distant world, and the author's exaggerated historical and social environment.

Within the feminist dystopian worlds, leaping significantly forward into the 20th century, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale* (1985) highly represents the main aspects of the feminist dystopia, as power politics on all levels and social and gender issues are concerned. However, it is more than twenty years ago that Russ suggested concepts such as duality and otherness leading to forms of fragmentation on the socio-political (female/male) and on the psychological level (self/other). Hereupon the analysis focuses on the creation of worlds apart for the sexes and cultures (Dunja M. Mohr, 2005), and the two dystopian societies 'manland' and 'womanland' depicted in Russ's TFM. It is a former

exemplifying description where both men and women are a hierarchical organization structured in social layers.

In spite of Joanna Russ's own words it evidenced by her critical literary writing, she creates a good number of testimonies of both utopian and dystopian worlds. Along the 1960s and 1970s, Russ and her contemporaries introduced a profound change, positioning the female protagonist as a complete individual capable of all constructive and destructive activities, entirely outside of any relationship with the male identity of western myths (Albinsky, 1988: 160). This is a different situation where the male is no longer the absolute owner of all real activity. Joanna's fiction is categorized within *Science Fiction*, a genre that, over its history, devolved the constraints of the western cultural literary traditions by shaping alternative realities for humanity. And as Joanna Russ explained⁵ herself in an interview (Russ 1984, 29):

Science fiction is a natural, in a way, for any kind of radical thought. Because it is about things that have not happened and do not happen. It is very fruitful if you want to present the concerns of any marginal group, because you are doing it in a world where things are different.

At this point, we identify feminist utopia as a type of social science fiction, where the world is envisioned in stark contrast to patriarchal society. It consequently imagines a society without gender oppression, envisioning a future or an alternate reality where men and women are not stuck in traditional roles of inequality. However, what is the position of men in feminist utopian novels? Men are sometimes or occasionally absent; and superficially treated, if not ridiculously dealt with. They are not usually protagonists. It is in the novel *And Chaos Died* (1970) that Russ features a male protagonist, a homosexual whose conversion to heterosexuality is described as a *cure*. On the other hand, as above-mentioned, men indeed appear in her novels more often than it is expected, and particularly in TFM where gender ambiguity is evident and men receive a special and sometimes disgusting treatment. Men are present and changed into women, who being reinforced with male characteristics, ambiguity is served. In feminist literature it is uncommon to find male protagonists, but due to the reinvention of women, and the fragmentation of identities Russ's women turn 'mannish' and men-like. Either Janet (*The Female Man*) or Alyx (*Picnic in Paradise*) are saviors and rescuers; they both look like strong men, 'male women'. It leads us to ironically suspect and wonder: Why do women

⁵It is an extract of an interview between Samuel Delany and Joanna Russ in 1984, and can also be found in Farah Mendlesohn's *On Joanna* (2009).

have to resemble men? Why can women not simultaneously look like both feminine and strong? Is it necessary for a woman to become a social hero to be physically and behave as a man? Janet, the rescuer, a strong creature, sarcastically described as a man, is transported in time to the present more real world from *Whileaway*:

Janet, our only savoir, turned the corner in a gray flannel jacket and a grey flannel skirt down to her knees. That's a compromise between the worlds. She seemed to know where she was going. Badly sunburned, with more freckles than usual across her flat nose, Miss Evason stopped in the middle of the street, scratched her head all over yawned, and entered a drugstore. (1975: 87).

In order to paint the parallel universes of TFM, (the utopian, dystopian and real worlds) Russ sews a web of characters, the four 'Js' formed by Jeannine, Janet, Joanna and Jael, to obtain intricate relationships, and particularly new openly lesbian relationships. Through the analysis of four spaces, Russ represents different economic and historical stories forcedly interlinked to construct a difficultly woven history. Jeannine Dadier 'Joanna in the mirror' (1975: 2-3), is a librarian who still thinks that nothing happened in USA or the world, neither the World War II, the great depression nor social changes... She lives without any concerns, ignorant of political and social events mirrored in the ordinary 'woman' coming from a 1930s-like America. Another 'J', and not less important is Joanna, a college professor of the late 60's America, the narrator, protagonist and authorial voice. Janet is the material visitor of the utopian world, who '*appeared on Broadway at two o'clock in the afternoon in her underwear*' (1975: 4) and travels from the future utopian all-female world *Whileaway* and depicts the utopian science-fictional *male* character. Another masculine character is Jael, an assassin who comes from a future polarized into two warring camps, *Manland* and *Womanland*, (the dystopian and utopian spaces, respectively). Jael, the most politically active of the four 'J', looks like a *cyborg*, who physically presenting a row of steel teeth and retractable claws, is 'a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (Haraway, 1991: 149). As Martins, S.S. (2005) explains, the theory of the cyborgs is used to justify the transformations produced in the novel, a woman transformation into a techmonster', as Joanna suggests of herself: "*Who am I?... I'm not Jeannine. I'm not Janet. I'm not Joanna..... You'll meet me later*", (1975: 19) as a way of breaking the rules and claiming that things considered natural are not so, but are constructed by our ideas about them. Such a theory has had particular relevance to feminism, since Donna Haraway introduced it in 1991 in '*A Manifesto for Cyborgs*', in which women seem to be often discussed or treated in ways that reduce them to bodies by 'nature'. The *cyborg* is an escape from a repressive system of

dualisms because they are a transitional space between human and machine, nature and culture, and male and female. The term coined by Haraway, short for 'cybernetic organism', is a being with both biological and artificial components (e.g. electronic, mechanical of robotics). It is a metaphor of how fundamental contradictions in feminist theory and identity should be conjoined, rather than resolved, similar to the fusion of machine and organisms in *cyborgs*. The idea of the cyborg deconstructs the dichotomies of control and lack of control over the body, object and subject, nature and culture, in ways that are useful in postmodern feminist "thought". 'Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs - creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted' (Haraway, 1991: 149). In Russ, Jael suffers a technological transformation that provides a powerful, material sign of humans' ability to change and the SF resource that Russ uses to explain how the ambiguity breaks any duality, half-man, half-machine. As Haraway states:

I want to conclude with a myth about identity and boundaries which might inform late twentieth-century political imaginations. I am indebted in this story to writers like Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, John Varley, James Tiptree, Jr, Octavia Butler, Monique Wittig, and Vonda McIntyre. These are our story-tellers exploring what it means to be embodied in high-tech worlds. They are theorists for cyborgs. Exploring conceptions of bodily boundaries and social order, the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966, 1970) should be credited with helping us to consciousness about how fundamental body imagery is to world view, and so to political language. (1991: 173)

Along TFM, mannish gestures, movements, man-like dressing, and exaggerated male behaviors are Janet's characteristics, which help her act in a heroic way to rescue women from the social patriarchal frame. Even though she is treated in such terms, she is given most admiration by the author, an approval brought about by her imaginary resemblance, and where she, Joanna seems to hide and disguise herself. Returning to Jeannine, the most feminine J and the most criticized woman of the four represents the object of study for 'Joanna author': the woman educated by her family to get married and have children in a patriarchal and 'male chauvinism' society. Based on Mary Wollstonecraft's liberating idea about 'women not created for being men's solace', and girls being kept down by their parents and more than boys, Russ introduces the theory of 'the rescue of the female girl'. Puberty is seen 'as an awakening into sexual adulthood for both sexes.... has an alternative for young women and allows the girl to move into a full and free adulthood'. Hereupon the sexual openness of Russ's characters retakes also Simone de Beauvoir's words in *The*

Second Sex, “It is also the time when the prison bars of “femininity” enforced by law and custom, shut the girl in for good’ (Russ, 1995: 143).

Joanna Russ is protagonist and hero of the SF stories she creates, a narrative whose inner characteristics as critical and fictional writer can be describe according to empowerment and powerlessness as well as aggression and negation account for her writings. When running through the body of her work it is worth mentioning highly pronounced features of survival, community, violence, sex roles, the nature of oppression both external and internal and the necessity and nature of further civilization. She shows that a postmodernist-influenced narrative invades her writing and so TFM gives good reason. It develops an intricate and unsteady plot combining reality with fiction, and because of its small snippets construction and its disconcerting and confusing beginning, understanding makes difficult to grasp until the novel reading has progressed well ahead. As it is read along the first lines, Janet is introduced as ‘a very important event’ in a newspaper headline, in a clear demonstration of the affective treatment she is provided with all along the novel: “Woman appears from nowhere on Broadway, policeman vanishes.” (Russ 1975: 3). Joanna fragmentizes herself reinventing two *Joannas*, protagonist and author, who appear in the scene as protagonists and transforming herself into a man, ‘Who Am I?’ ‘I am who I am, but what’s my brand name? ... ‘I turned into a man. I had been a man before, but only briefly and in a crowd.’(1975: 19-20) Sometimes I, sometimes Joanna, sometimes moderator, advisor and narrator, and some other times protagonist, the author reinvents herself in other entities, in the other Joannas:

We got up and paid our quintuple bill; then we went out into the street. I said goodbye and went off with Laur, I, Janet; I also watched them go, I, Joanna; moreover I went off to show Jael the city, I Jeannine, I Jael, I myself” (1975: 212).

In the final lines of the novel we can read a remarkable apology of the current and future feminist situation. Strongly, she urges to continue pursuing an ideology in analogy with women’s activism, to always be strong in an attempt not to become defeated in any offensive situations women and her ‘little book’ may encounter:

Go little book, trot through Texas and Vermont... Do not complain when at last you become quaint and old-fashioned,...Do not get glum when you are no longer understood, little book. Do not curse your fate. Do not reach up from readers’ laps and punch the readers’ noses. Rejoice, little book! For on that day, we will be free. (213)

It is now imperious to return to procreation or reproduction for being one of the utopian features characterizing women's struggle inside feminist SF stories. As mentioned before, in the utopian women's world men are no longer needed for reproduction, instead scientific breakthroughs are used. Neither are they necessary nor anything. How do men manage in their world without women? It is evident the high degree of reliance Russ sets on women for reproduction. From this perspective, whatever women share provides the basis for "sisterhood," or unity, solidarity and shared identity. At the same time men trivialize maternity, even though they must depend on women if they want to have children:

Manlanders have no children. Manlanders buy infants from the Womanlanders and bring them up in batches, save for the rich few who can order children made from their very own semen: keep them in city nurseries until they're five, then out into the country training ground, with the gasping little misfits buried in baby cemeteries along the way. There in ascetic and healthful settlements. (1975: 167)

In terms of procreation, we should also make a reference again to Bradley Lane's *Mizora*, in which Vera, the female protagonist, discovers that in the utopian only-women world she finds in the Earth hollow, life originates in a laboratory by developing cells chemically in test tubes. She is fascinated and intrigued about procreation without men: "[...] a scientist proposed to let the race die out' (Lane, 1880: 103). Then she is intriguingly asked what she sees through a microscope, to what she answers "an exquisitely minute cell in violent motion". Her interlocutor further explains:

You are now looking upon the germ of all Life; be it animal or vegetable, a flower or a human being... We have advanced far enough in Science to control its development. Know that MOTHER is the only important part of all life. In the lowest organisms no other sex is apparent (1880: 103)

In *Whileaway* parthenogenesis⁶, is the solution to replace man's intervention, whereas in *Mizora* women use another scientific means known as 'the genotypic parent'. The biological mother is 'the body-mother' and the non-bearing mother is 'the other mother' contributing the other ovum. Apart from their similarity in contents and thematic, both novels share also the fact that both were published in 1975, first edition and second edition respectively.

⁶A form of reproduction in which an unfertilized egg develops into a new individual. It is common among insects and certain other arthropods.

Without entering legal theories related to the different currents of feminism, such as liberal, cultural, radical and socialist, it is necessary to allude to the differences between sex and gender. Sex distinguishes men and women as male and female according to the natural humankind, and gender refers to the social characteristics or masculine or feminine attributes. Since the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's treatise, a fierce debate arose against essentialists, who argue that the differences between the sexes are biologically determined. In this sense, Joanna Russ plays with *gender ambiguity* by exchanging roles. Both women and men live separately and exchange their genders and subsequent roles in their isolated worlds. Manland is an all-man world far from any infection, i.e. far from infecting women. As dystopia implies it is a hierarchical society, where young its inhabitants the men, are forced to take operations and changed into women. Manlanders fall into three categories of men, real-men, changed and half-changed men, living in a hierarchical society whose role is determined as they are growing up. It represents a scathing critique of patriarchy and what men see in women and use for women is what they hide in themselves. Russ plays with the surgical transformation of men and identification of roles:

There, in ascetic and healthful settlements in the country little boys are made into Men—though some don't quite make it; sex-change surgery begins at sixteen. One out of seven fails early and makes the full change; one out of seven fails later and (refusing surgery) makes only half a change: artists, illusionists, impressionists of femininity who keep their genitalia but who grow slim, grow languid, grow emotional and feminine, all this the effect of spirit only. Five out of seven Manlanders make it; these are "real-men". The others are "the changed" of the "half-changed". All real-men like the changed; some real-men like the half-changed; none of the real-men like the real-men, for that would be abnormal. Nobody asks the changed of half-changed what they like. (1975: 167)

The candent social constructionist theory of the patriarchal society in many Women Departments of USA Universities states that children are educated to be masculine and feminine. This is theory that Russ was concerned about and used 40 years ago, thus contradicting the neuroscientist theory based on the biological differentiation and making use of the gender identity of becoming aware of how women are supposed to think and act.

Gender transformation of identity receives a fierce treatment, and what is given more criticism is the traditional *be the woman you are supposed to be*. Laura Rose Wilding, a secondary character of the novel reflects beautifully the anxieties and the trauma a woman develops inside since her childhood, a very strict feminist perspective that justifies gender identity changes and fragmentation:

When I was five I said, "I'm not a girl, I'm a genius" but that doesn't work, possibly because other people don't honor the resolve'. Last year I finally gave up and told my mother I didn't want to be a girl but she said Oh, no, being a girl is wonderful. Why? Because you can wear pretty clothes and you don't have to do anything; the man will do it for you....(66-67):

In *TFM* Russ shows her inner ideals, not only by treating women's positions in situations where the man has always had a dominant position, but she also providing the picture of a 'weakened man' under the disguise of a 'changed, half-changed' man, a 'womanish' man⁷ who is to fulfill the women's roles, in high contrast with the 'real-man'. A genre she uses as a way to claim women's position not only in society but also in 'life', where Joanna Russ seems, due to the gender identity ambiguity, to apparently praise the 'hero male' and its superiority in front of women. Such a sex and sometimes gender ambiguity, 'female man, male woman' is what she uses to vindicate the women's place in society. Janet, one the 'J' protagonists is sarcastically described as a man, her gestures, movements, dressing, and exaggerated male behaviors: "Janet our only savior, turned the corner in a gray flannel jacket and a gray flannel skirt down to her knees [...] Scratched her head all over, yawned, and entered a drugstore." (1975: 87) In Jeannine's words, Russ criticizes the general opinion people have and have long had about women in society. Although Jeannine is the most feminine character of the four woman characters in representation of the 'social stereotypes', she is the one receiving more criticism: the man's general opinion about women, and not precisely for her own female condition. She, once more time, embodied in Jeannine, tries to convince herself of her female condition and what it entails, criticizing the natural condition of being man, a 'poor man':

Cal is sweet. Poor, but sweet. I wouldn't give up Cal for anything, I enjoy being a girl, don't you? I wouldn't be a man for anything; I think they have such a hard time of it. I like being admired. I like being a girl. I wouldn't be a man for anything. Not for anything." (1975: 86)

By using sarcastic and ironic descriptions such as those discussing about male selfishness, (Russ 1975: 93), who in doing so, she highlights that man is a rhetorical convention for "human" and that the term "man" includes "woman". In spite of criticizing men as a selfish creature, she introduces the idea of turning herself into a man, who some way obsessed with 'not being a female, but a male', she does it addressing the reader in a straightforward

⁷In analogy with Annie Denton Cridge's *Man's Rights; or Would you Likeit?* (1870), which revisits the wave of utopian and dystopian fiction that distinguished later decades of the nineteenth century

fashion. When Russ deals with serious behaviors and situations, her humoristic style is noticeable and in many different moments the reader may be confused and led to think thoroughly of this gender reinvention:

I'll tell you how I turned into a man. First I had to turn into a woman. For a long time I had been neuter, not a woman at all, but One Of The Boys, because if you walk into a gathering of men, professionally or otherwise, you might as well be wearing a sandwich board that says: LOOK! I HAVE TITS! (1975: 133)

If you want to be respected in a man's meeting, you have to be seen as a man otherwise you are only seen as a sexual reference. And to be unnoticed, women must camouflage in disguise behind the man's appearance and for man's acceptance. Therefore, women will only be respected turning into a man. In the intermingled network of feminine characters a fabric of friendship, admiration and homosexual attraction is evident. However, are men admired in the spirit of Janet? Some misunderstanding could arise. If women aspire to be like her for respectful and considered treatment, does it imply that only being a man would women receive admiration and social consideration?

In the resulted unified system all its members are cleverly and reciprocally related, and by means of touches of lesbianism and sexual ambiguity they are also reunited by chance and explain each other. In order to obtain the union of the characters, she waves an excellent web of science fictional events where she, Joanna, is one of the main protagonists. We would also remark that most of the concerns related to transsexual women put forward in *TheFemaleMan*, were a product of the time and her personal situation. The social demand of women's rights was seen unreal, as Joanna herself stated in an interview with Samuel Delany⁸:

SD- I was just wondering, I know you mentioned that your opinions of gay men used to very different & traditional, I was wondering if your opinions of transsexual women have changed since you wrote The Female Man.

JR: Oh yes. Oh yes it's almost as if my life as arranged itself to disabuse me of one prejudice after another. And all of these have gone because none of them were real really.

SD: Do you want to say anything more about that or move on?

JR: Let's move on.

Russ's novel stands out also for its embrace of technology that as stated by Susana S. Martins in her article 'Revising the Future in The Female Male', the utopian space of

⁸This is an extract from a telephone interview Joanna Russ held with Samuel Delany in May 2006 and published on September 22, 2010 in Broadsheet.

Whileaway, is represented 'as a high-tech all-female culture where women use technology to fully realize their potential.' (2005: 405). Manland is the markedly dystopian world where technology relates to time, history and the other upcoming real possibilities: "The induction helmet makes it possible for one workwoman to have not only the brute force but also the flexibility and control of thousands; it's turning Whileawayan industry upside down". (1975: 13-14). 'High-tech houses' the premonition of automation are another example of technology, by which houses are equipped with high-tech facilities and help do home chores and make life easier and more comfortable. In her short story *NorCustomStale* included in Russ's collection *TheHiddenSideoftheMoon* (1989), technology plays an important role, because in this case a high-tech intelligent house is a metaphor of 'immortality' and 'security'. An agitated debate about life is held between the house's owner and a guest: if 'monotony is life' or 'monotony is death'. Freda and Harry are an ancient couple who live in a perfect immortal house that leads them to have a monotonous life in perfect harmony; for changes, as Harry says, lead men to age he thinks that they will live quietly forever. However, the house starts to fail and the man, as in the case of Adam and Eve in the *Books of the Old Testament*, convinces Eve to eat the apple in the paradise. Freda is Eve, and is tempted to live in their house forever in an exhaustive routine even though the house is not working properly.

To conclude, now that Joanna Russ is sadly gone, we are very grateful and very much obliged for her legacy and generosity. Although we have painfully lost an impressive author, we have gained an important milestone who witnessed a very decisive historical moment for women, whose contribution has influenced contemporary literature, the novel and short story genre, and even more importantly, she opened a deserved path for women writers along the 20th and 21st centuries. As a final reflection we can state that the discourse aroused by feminist women thirty or more years ago has hardly changed, and in the 21st century, and mainly in some cultural and social environments, it is a lively portrait of women's claims. We can conclude that in many moments of the novel, she seizes the opportunity to pick on men and locate women in a higher place, bringing the female sex face to face with the male sex and strong creatures opposite weak creatures. It is important to note that in TFM utopian elements coexist with dystopian elements, identifying utopian women societies as harmonious classless, ecological-minded and sexually permissive communities and contrasted with hierarchical, conflicting, non-permissive sexual and dystopian communities.

Joanna is indeed protagonist and narrator, hero of her own story, who also wants to transmit her most insight feminist feelings and her lesbian condition in Laur's mouth:

'Women only have feelings; men have egos. The school psychologist told me I might not realize it, but I was living a very dangerous style of life that might in time lead to Lesbianism (ha! ha!)' (Russ, 1975: 67)

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