The genre of literature called Science Fiction or SF owes its present day form and content to legends, dreams, and fancies of its author as well as, to a large extent, to changing technologies in printing and distribution and to the economic realities. SF sometimes has a relationship with the principles of science and sometimes deals with partially fictional laws of Science.

“Speculative fiction” also imagines alternative worlds where current developments - social, political, technological, and scientific are dealt in logical extremes. SF writers also often “predict” the future and they have also used their imagined futures to question and challenge the changes they observe in the society. As a genre, SF has provided more space for debates.

SF can be found in many guises and it often deals with aliens, space travel, time travel, parallel universes, extraterrestrial life, paranormal abilities or some megalomaniac scientists’ threat to conquer the whole world. Exploring the consequences of the scientific innovations is one of the purposes of SF, making it a “literature of ideas”. Many call it a literature of change and thought experiments.

The origin of SF dates back a long time. The epics of early Greek civilization feature superhuman beings who resided on Mount Olympus, of voyages to far distant worlds, and people transforming into animals. The Satires of Syrian writer Lucian of Samosata in the 2nd century A.D. were the first fiction on travel beyond the earth. In True History the people are wafted to the Moon, and travellers observe the interplanetary battle fought to determine if the empire of the Moon or the Sun gets to colonize Venus.

The invention of the magnetic compass and advances in ship building made voyages possible leading to a “New World”. In On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres (1540) Copernicus demonstrated that the cosmos is vast and does not revolve around the earth. With the development of the telescope in the 17th Century the concept of “Plurality of Worlds” was taken seriously.

The flat earth had become spherical. The earth was no longer the central object of God’s creation but a satellite of the sun as proved by the Copernican scheme. Kepler’s law and Newton’s laws of motion and universal gravitation gave a more accurate position of the earth in the solar system. The Industrial Revolution accelerated the transformation of
human material life. Experiments with steam power led to the steam engine – a substitute for muscle power. The 19th century saw the impact of technology and how life of man metamorphosed due to it. The experiments with locomotives began in 1801 and advanced through the airship in 1852.

Human being’s dream of flying became a reality when man ascended in the air in hydrogen-filled balloons. Voyages to the moon, stars and planets became common. The 1969 landing on the moon was a landmark moment in SF writing.

After Hugo Gernsback coined the term “Science Fiction”, it became a talisman or a label that has become separated from its phenomenon and has developed within its own logic. The term did not come into usage until the 1920s.

Definitions of SF
Defining SF is a herculean task. Many have attempted to define it but hitherto no one has been able to do so completely. The Oxford English Dictionary defines SF as “imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes, frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel”.

Kingsley Amis (1960) says, “Science fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology, or pseudo-science or pseudo-technology, whether human or extra-terrestrial in origin.”

Isaac Asimov (1975) said, “Science fiction can be defined as that branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology.”

Characteristics of Science Fiction
Distinctive features such as change, dependence on science, predominance of ideas, technique of extrapolation, new symbols, metaphors, and modern mythology based on science, constitute the genre of SF.

Literature of Change: SF presents wonder, action and romance and performs its role as the literature of change. As Arthur C. Clarke in his ‘Kalinga Award Speech’ says, the SF writer “by mapping out possible futures as well as a good many impossible ones….encourages in his readers flexibility of mind, readiness to accept and even welcome change – in one word, adaptability.” The SF writers have focused attention on overpopulation, pollution, ecological imbalance, automation, mind manipulation, transplantation of tissues, travel in space, encounter with aliens, etc.

Dependence on Science: The SF writers create a non-existent condition on the basis of the hypothesis or the primary assumption or the basic premise which
is based on accepted principles, a fact in science. “What happens if…..” scientific or technological instruments are the basis to most SF stories.

Predominance of Ideas: The most characteristic feature of the genre is the predominance of ideas over everything else. An idea can build a plot. Characters themselves are sometimes ideas personified.

Extrapolation: SF is set in the future and has often been referred as ‘Futuristic Fiction’. This rests on the effects of science and technology on humans in future. SF extrapolates scientific, social or political changes related to the present time into the future. SF opens as many futures as possible for humans.

Symbol, Metaphor, Allegory: SF derives its meaning when we consider its devices and artifacts as symbols of wish fulfillment, hope, anxiety and fear; its altered settings and alien characters as metaphors of human predicament and manifestations of human nature; its plots as loose allegories of human life.

Modern Mythology: Along with the scientific progress and advancement of technology things have undergone a change. Humans need new myths to explain the inexplicable, to give shape to their unconscious and personal obsessions and to recreate new archetypal images. Science has replaced the old gods. SF makes it possible to help translate the ideas of science into fictional situations and take on the role of new mythology.

Fantasy and reality are the two cardinal components of SF. Mary Shelley, daughter of William Godwin and wife of the famous poet P.B. Shelley, penned a gothic tale about a man-made monster. Frankenstein (1818) is the first SF novel to borrow a device from the scientific speculations of its time. It is one of the greatest novels of the genre. Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1866) is a fictional representation about the ambivalence of human nature.

During the 18th Century, Gulliver’s Travels (1726) by Jonathan Swift presents an extended parody of experimental science and a vision of a terrifying super weapon, a flying island and its rulers who crush any earthly opposition to their tyranny.

The first pulp to specialize in SF was Trill Book (1919). The first magazine with any commercial durability was Amazing Stories (1926) founded by Hugo Gernsback.

Isaac Asimov is perhaps the most widely known writer of modern times. He deals with a vast variety embracing diverse fields like science fiction, detective fiction, popular science, religion, literary criticism, history, mythology, humour and limericks. His SF is characterized by three qualities: neatness of plot, apparent plausibility of devices and clarity of narration. His language has no frills of fancy. It is always straight and clear and in his fiction emotion is irrelevant – only reason and science, the survival factors, are of importance. He derives fame chiefly from his series of robot stories and the series of stories that form his Foundation trilogy.
Edgar Allan Poe wrote about a flight to the moon as did H.G. Wells. Olaf Stapledon, C.S. Lewis, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and J.G. Ballard are the important SF writers who contributed significantly to British SF.

In American SF, Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Frederik Pohl, Ray Bradbury, Philip Dick, Roger Zelany, and Samuel Delany are the important writers. Women writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ and Octavia Butler have also expanded the boundary of SF.

**Indian Science Fiction**

The era of modern SF in India began with the publication of *Ashcharya Vritant* (1884) and was further popularized by the appearance of the Hindi magazine *Saraswati* (1900). In its sixth issue, Keshav Prasad Singh published the story *Chandralok Ki Yatra*, which was influenced by the work of Jules Verne’s ‘Five Weeks in a Balloon’.

SF gained popularity in Indian languages through novels and short stories. Acharya Chatursen is commonly referred to as ‘The Father of Hindi SF’. His books *Khagras* (The Eclipsed Moon), *Neelmani* (The Sapphire) and *Adbhut Manav* (The Amazing Man) deal with SF. Arvind Mishra and Harish Goyal are among the few writers who have contributed significantly to Hindi SF.

Many Bengali writers were inspired by and imitated western SF writers like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. The scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose’s, *Polatok Toofan* or Runaway Cyclone, describes how a storm was averted with the help of that quintessentially Indian ingredient — hair oil. Satyajit Ray carried the torch forward with stories like *Halba*, which inspired Steven Spielberg’s Hollywood SF blockbuster, *E.T. Turbulence* by Samit Basu presents a 21st century Indian subcontinent where a group of ordinary people on a flight from London to Delhi suddenly develop super powers based on what they wanted most in life.


*The Beast with Nine Million Feet* by Anil Menon is a masterpiece blending science, fantasy, culture, corruption, familial crisis, bondage set in 2040 AD Pune. In Kerala, we have had writers like Konniyoor Narendranath, S. Sivadas, P.R. Madhava Panicker, P.N. Krishnan Kutty, many more.

Science Fiction gives you greater enjoyment intellectually than any other branch of literature. It expands and stretches your mind. Science Fiction is like chess; you are an SF fan, or you are not!

Not only is science fiction an idea of tremendous importance, but it also plays an important role in making the world a better place to live in by educating the public of the possibilities of science and the influence of science on life.

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