Fabulation of Alternative Parallel Universes: Queertopia in Turkish Science Fiction

Sümeyra Buran
Istanbul Medeniyet University, Istanbul, Turkey

Introduction: Feminist Cyberpunk

WHAT if there are other universes just like ours where we can meet uncountable versions of our beloved ones who have passed away from this world? A mirror or a reverse version of our reality is not so far and may, in fact, be right here. In recent times, interdimensional travel and alternate reality have gained increasing prominence in science fiction film series like Stranger Things, Travellers, The OA, Black Mirror, and Fringe. However, the parallel universe or multiverse concept traces back to Margaret Cavendish's 17th century The Blazing World. It reached its peak with the cyberpunk tradition in the 1980s. Cyberpunk's white masculine and heterosexual forms are reimagined by a parallel universe of feminist cyberpunk writers like Pat Cadigan, Kathy Acker, Melissa Scott, and Marge Piercy, all of whom focus on diverse forms of feminist and queer perspectives. Feminist cyberpunk writing focuses on queer communities, reproduction, motherhood, mythology, and religion. Feminism's political notions meet with science fiction's narrative concepts such that feminist sf authors explore non-binary gender-fluid identities. Queer theory “converge[s] with science fiction's imaginative production of ‘sometimes-utopian futurities’” (Lothian, 17), and we can regard such feminist utopian novels as queer utopias (queertopia) with their non-binary single-sex female relations and asexual reproduction by women like in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's Herland or Nicola Griffith's Ammonite.

Şeyda Aydın (Sheida Aiden) is the first Turkish feminist and queer science fiction author who speculates neo-futuristic utopia and cyberpunk anti-utopias/dystopias. Her novels cannot be considered in the category of lesbian separatist utopian fiction but, rather, fall under the umbrella of utopian queer fiction. Aydın's The Woman in the Other Universe (2019) initially begins in a green queertopian techno-universe called Netta (meaning “worth”), a peaceful utopic world, but eventually shifts to a retro cyberpunk dys(queer)topian parallel universe called Antero (meaning “male”), which is a dangerous reversal of Netta. As Wendy Pearson claims, “sf and queer
theory frequently share both a dystopian view of the present and a utopian hope for the future” (59), so Aydın portrays both dystopian and utopian views of queer sf in her novel.

Departing from Donna Haraway’s note that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (148), I argue that science fiction explores “queer worlding” by offering alternate sexuality in the utopian portrayal of gender-friendly universes. As Lisa Yazsek claims, “feminist cyberpunk reject[s] the alienation, isolation, and nihilism typically associated with masculinist cyberpunk and replace it with an emphasis on creative self-expression, community, and sociopolitical change” (32). In this respect, Aydın’s novel depicts genderless eternal love by queer women who travel between parallel universes through opening a gate portal with a triangle machine as a social norm.

My aim is to discuss the intersections between feminist cyberpunk and queer theory to explore how queer Turkish science fiction speculatively represents alternate constructions of gender identity in cyberpunk future by breaking sexist walls in a culture constructed around gender. Aydın focuses on the impact of gender on the lives of women by rethinking the problematics of Turkish science fiction’s straight heteronormative discourse. Thus, I examine how queer sexualities and homonormativity in a genderless utopian universe challenge racial and discriminative orders constructed by the homophobic and transphobic society represented in a dystopian cyberpunk universe. Aydın’s novel demonstrates how non-Western alternative feminist futures offer new forms for both family and gender by questioning the importance of what it means to be a genderqueer human being in a utopian universe, as well as its reversal in a reflected dystopian parallel universe.

Gateway to a Parallel Cyberpunk Universe

The novel starts with film writer Veera Virtanen’s mourning for her partner of 13 years, Eeva Van Rooyen, who died due to cancer in Netta, where non-sexist, queer, transgendered individuals and all other sexes live together in peace. Vera searches for the reflection of Eeva, who continues to exist under another identity in a place called Antero. So, to find her lover, Veera travels to Antero, where people are accustomed to living in a capitalist and imperialist world filled with viruses, contagious illnesses, homophobia, femicide, child sexual abuse, animal torture, hunger, anger, hatred,
wars, environmental and economic collapse, and gender inequalities. In this other
dimension, a different reflection of Eeva continues to exist as a famous actress and a
movie star dedicated to saving children from AIDS.

Şeyda Aydın explores what would happen if we could open a portal to a parallel
universe that is completely opposite to our reality. The novel echoes Joanna Russ's
*The Female Man*, which offers four different parallel universes centered on the same
woman (professor Joanna and Jeannie are the closest to our world, with Janet hailing
from an alternate future all-female world of no men and Jael from a world in between
ours and Janet's in which men are killed as a result of a war between men and women).
Aydın's novel, in fact, makes a harsh criticism of our own world, portraying it as a
dystopian parallel universe in which queer people fight to survive. So, we can say
that by creating a dystopian cyberpunk parallel universe in tandem with a utopian
one, she depicts how pure and genderless love can overcome all struggle and rage.

A group of scientists in the novel tries to open a *Stranger Things*-style gateway to
a parallel universe. Physicists open “a triangular door hung in the air on the front of
the three-meter machine; it was floating like a sea of mercury, it was like a mirror
when it appeared completely, and when Veera looked at the door, she could see
multiple fluctuating reflections of her” (Aydın 132). The novel depicts the fact that
“[f]or some reason, the person who will pass through the door must be women; the
doors only allow if a woman is standing in front of it, and it works like that and the
doors only opens to a single world dimension” where the person does not exist (105).
This shows that, like in science fiction movies, we are not likely to sit and chat with
our reflection in another universe (108).

The gate resembles a pyramid that allows the transition to the alternative
dimension, which is dark and dangerous. Veera deeply feels sad when she meets
her lover, Eeva, who is oppressed, repressed, and changed by the patriarchal society.
Eeva is able to upload her previous memories and identity from the Netta universe
through a consciousness transfer when she falls in love and remembers Veera again.
However, in homophobic Antero, the media and news start a defamation campaign
against Eeva for her lesbian affair. Eeva is on the verge of losing her career and even
suffers from harassment and violence perpetuated by the public. Veera can’t stand
seeing her successful Eeva like this and decides to return to Netta in order to save her
life from society’s lynching attempts. Then, thanks to Veera, who provides a curative
vaccine that she brought from Netta, Eeva devotes her life to protecting children
from AIDS. The couple lives in separate universes until they reunite in Antero on Eeva’s 60th birthday with their daughter, EB.

**Cyberqueertopian and Dis(queer)topian Parallel Universes**

Following Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” and the cyborg world it describes, Aydın’s queertopian universe is itself a kind of cyborg world “about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of the joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (Haraway 154). So, as Hollinger comments, “queer marks a utopian space, which is, perhaps, also an ironic space, inhabited by subjects-in-process who are not bound by reifying definitions and expectations, and in which bodies, desires, and sex/gender behaviors are free-floating and in constant play” (33) Thus, Haraway’s cyborg figure offers queertopian potential. Aydın, by creating such two opposite parallel universes, a cyberqueertopia and a dis(queer)topia, criticizes the homophobic attitudes of our world by creating a beacon of hope with her queertopian Netta, which resembles Haraway’s own cyborg world in which “gender might not be global identity at all” (180). So, Aydın depicts a queertopian future in which we become “fluid, being both material and opaque” (Haraway 153).

Also similar to Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Aydın’s queer utopian Netta welcomes gender equality where there is no sexism, racism, homophobia, or transphobia. Like in Le Guin’s *The Dispossed: An Ambigious Utopia*, Aydın contrasts two universes: Antero—an oppressive and exploitative dystopian universe ruled by the worst of capitalism and patriarchy—and its parallel universe, Netta—a perfect genderqueer utopia ruled by peace and equality. The inhabitants of Netta call each other by non-gendered words such as “Dear” or “Beloved.” Aydın also anticipates a counter-alternative future in Netta in that the most culturally and economically developed country is “the State of African Continental Integrity” which, with its best doctors, finds treatments and cures for all diseases and viruses (Aydın 73). She also locates futuristic alternatives in the fact that this universe ends world wars by closing the last “arms factory” in the world (73). That is, Aydın’s queer future is no longer “curtailed, whether through death from AIDS or via the policing and delegitimization of deviant desires” (Lothian 5). However, the depiction of Africa in the Antero universe depicts Africa much worse than now, surrounded by AIDS
As Lee Edelman says, “queer is a zone of possibilities” (114), and as a third-wave feminist and cyberpunk writer, Aydın offers “another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual” (de Lauretis, iv) with her lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters. Aydın creates genderqueer families without a nuclear family bond: Veera and Eeva neither have a heterosexual family unit nor live under the same roof, and in fact inhabit totally different universes. Eeva's egg transportation allows Veera to have a daughter in a more beautiful, modern world, where transgender, gay, lesbian, and other kinds of queer people can have children by technologies that free women “from the tyranny of their sexual reproductive roles” (Firestone 31) and also free men from their boundaries of reproduction within the nuclear family unit. That is, Aydın's quertopian alternative world offers a beacon of reproductive hope for queer and transgender people. Meanwhile, however, in the homophobic and transphobic Antero, where sex-change surgeries were banned years ago and homosexuals and transgender people are excluded, beaten, and even killed if they do not hide their sexual orientation, Veera's manager, Siiri, a black transgender woman, is reflected in an unhappy male body (98). The novel depicts the fact that, in a dystopian cyberpunk universe, gender equality cannot be achieved until the “one-sided domain of power ends in all spheres of life” (Buran 2020).

**Conclusion: From Myth Towards a Goddess-like Posthuman**

Feminist cyberpunk writing focuses on queer communities, reproduction, motherhood, mythology, and religion. As Carlen Lavigne claims, women's cyberpunk novels reflect “the problematic positioning of mythology and folklore with feminist thought—feminists, in general, do not seem happy with either mythology or religion, but no alternative language has yet been produced; the cyborg has not yet truly risen as an iconic image, and within cyberpunk there is little room for the goddess” (130). Aydın criticizes patriarchal mythologies by creating her own mythological figure, a giant raven that represents a goddess of nature, the universe, and memory who watches over the two mourning queer lovers, Eeva and Veera, and changes the rules of physics in the universe to reunite them at the end of the novel.¹

The novel concludes when the couple reunites and begins to live in Netta with
their posthuman daughter, EB who, like a mythological goddess Lofn, a Norse goddess of forbidden love, reunites the couple. Born from the two eggs of two mothers from different universes, EB becomes a time- and dimensional traveler and, like a goddess-like posthuman, changes the ugly consciousness of human beings. In Aydın’s third novel, Fragmented Reflections (2019), she even ends the gender bias in Antero forever.

Aydın shows that, until the divisions between different sexes end, women, lesbians, gays, queer and transgender people cannot escape from the constructed binary conflicts of gender even in alternative universes in the future. Thus, I conclude that in order to live in a borderless, gender-free future, we should recognize new kinds of gender and identities outside the binary gender markers of women/men.

Notes

1. The genus Corvus represented by the raven preserves all its mystery throughout the story. The raven was inspired by the raven goddess Muninn—the memory in Norse-Scandinavian mythology, and it protects the love of queer women throughout the novel. According to the old religion of Turkish Shamanism which includes the 500 years of journey from Central Asia to today’s Turkey, the past, present and future are related to the stars in the universe. After converted to Islam, some Turks continued to believe in extraterrestrial life and highly intelligent creatures from the other stars in different multiple layers of the universe. One of the mythological creatures in Turkic-Shamanic Myth is raven which symbolizes healing and protection.

Works Cited

Aydın, Şeyda. Woman in the Other Universe (Diğer Evrendeki Kadın). İstanbul: İkinci Adam, 2019.


De Lauretis, Teresa. “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.” Differences: A


