



Reconstruction Of Meaning In Gilman's Herland: Limitations Of A Feminist Utopia

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Abstract: Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1936) well known for her contribution for future feminists, wrote the feminine utopic novel- *Herland* (1915) which presents an 'isolated' society composed entirely of "women" who reproduces via "parthenogenesis" (asexual reproduction). When reading the novel we find the novel describes or defines the appropriate 'femininity' of the "gender"- "woman". The novel tends to adhere to the stereotypical socially described features of the strategically 'binarized' gender- men and women and then makes an inversion if these stereotypically categorized features in a matriarchal society, it presents. The novel is regarded as a feminist utopia. Somewhere yet in many ways the novel fumbles at the threshold of embodied patriarchy. In the novel's effort to define a category of 'construction' with all utopic supremacy, it fixes the position of that 'constructed category' with stereotypical and patriarchal "natural" roles of "motherhood" and creation of a 'perfect society'. Feminism is antidote to patriarchy. Patriarchy may be regarded as constantly mutating drug resisting virus that binaries, limits gender within binaries, constructs categories, working to establish supreme authority of the 'one'. Therefore in this paper I will study how a feminist utopia also has its limitations.

Index Terms- gender, woman, utopia, essentialisation, motherhood, embodied patriarchy, power, and matriarchy.

Introduction

Herland is a utopian novel, written in 1915 by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The novel is considered to be the middle volume in Perkin's utopian trilogy, preceded by *Moving the Mountain* (1911), and followed by *With Her in Ourland* (1916). The book was first published in monthly installments in a series called *The Forerunners*, a monthly magazine based in New York city during the time of women's suffrage movement which comprised controversial articles and progressive ideas.

Much of *Herland* by Gilman has been studied as a Feminist Utopia. The women in *Herland* are the perfect "parthenogenetic" (*Herland*, Gilman, 75; ch. 5) mothers (who gives birth by asexual reproduction), which is their highest defining identity. Another novel that presents societies comprising only women is Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), a science fiction novel that follows the lives of four women living in parallel worlds that differ in time and place. Their encounter at the end of the novel influences their ideas about what it means to be a "woman". While studying and analyzing *Herland* critics have often overlooked the limitations of *Herland* as a Feminist Utopia. Georgia Johnston in her article -*Three Men in Herland: Why They Enter the Text*, primarily deals with the presence of men in *Herland*, explaining that men were introduced to mirror the reader's society. Johnston generalizes that readers are "automatically aligned with men in terms of knowledge and tradition" (Johnston, 56). Johnston further mentions her article how the three 'men' function "as [a] reader's friends, asking the kind of questions and having the kind of reactions the reader might be having" (Pamela J

Annas, 387). Van, (the male speaker of the novel) is presented as Johnston introduces in her article, "condemns his own society's values particularly those that abuse the maternal principles"(Johnston, 56). Therefore the main line of research in Johnston's article focuses on generalizing readers as 'men' and supports Gilman's thought of revaluing the society by providing women with the space and identity Herland is giving. In another article- *The Utopian Imagination of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Reconstruction of Meaning in Herland*, by Kim Johnson Bogart, Bogart foregrounds the idea of utopia in *Herland* on the basis of 'dualism' or 'binary' - that is, eliminating one from the other to achieve perfection. Bogart mentions in her article, how by eliminating "poor" from the dichotomy of rich vs. poor, preserves the notion of "rich" to "accomplish a world of economic equality and welding for everyone"(Looking Backward, Edward Bellamy, Bogart, 85). Bogart also presents how language works in binary, as in, what is "masculine is not feminine, what is public cannot be private"(Bogart, 85), presenting how Gilman too highlights that Herland cannot be Hisland. Bogart presents how Gilman within this dualism of 'Utopia' focuses on singularity of term through Van - "As Van gains a sense of the multiplicity and divergence of meanings within a single term ... he constitutes meaning" (Bogart, 88). Therefore, Bogart shows how "Van shifts his focus from assumed opposition and exclusion between good and evil to a notion of growth..."(Bogart, 88).

My dissertation focuses on how 'sex', 'gender' are essentialized in 'women', that is bodies with vagina are generalized to have similar experience in terms of identity, desire. This dissertation seeks to address the question-how the 'body' is identified with 'symbols', how the definition of feminism in this novel is nothing but an embodied patriarchy, how the queer aspect is completely obliterated, how 'parthenogenesis' is implemented to adhere woman and their body to be worshipped as 'virgins', how motherhood supposedly 'completes' a woman, how seclusion is 'un-utopic', how heteronormativity is presented by introducing men into woman's land and finally how Gilman discards the importance of treating women as human beings. In the novel *Herland*, Gilman provides an isolated society of women who produces via parthenogenesis (asexual reproduction). The result of which is a perfect social order characterized by peace, free from war, conflict, and domination.

Feminism, if considered a hermeneutical device which is a methodology for interpreting texts, is used to unearth the meaning of Gilman's *Herland*, then the novel only gets portrayed as an embodied patriarchal text, which is nothing but a feminist text apparently, with all patriarchal features. Gilman begins the novel with the voice of a male speaker describing the 'country' unknown to the world. The very first sentence of the novel "this is written from memory, unfortunately"(Gilman, 1), shows Herland as the product of her imagination in which Gilman tries to put hues of reality including a tone of sadness that such a world like "Herland" perhaps remains unreal. In this sentence, Gilman also attempts to show what her novel constitutes- a world comprising bodies that is defined as "woman", nurtured and established as an accepted identity of what a 'woman' is! Gilman fails to realize that bodies are all words whose meanings can and always change and evolve, one can never 'grasp' the exact, correct definition of any "body" defined as a definite form. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990) regarding the "metaphysics of substance" in which she writes about the definition of "self" and quotes from one of the critique of "metaphysics of substance" Michel Haar that the very "notion of psychological person as a substantive thing."(Haar, as cited in Butler, 29). Further, Butler, to emphasize on the fact that body is just a "word", quotes "...The subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious unities having at start only a linguistic reality" (Haar, as cited in Butler, 29). Gilman's attempt to describe what a woman is and how they should be treated in the society from which the three men come or to say from the patriarchal society (according to Gilman as compared to her perfect "feminist" society she portrays in the novel) *Herland* becomes "naturally patriarchal" and not "natural".

Gilman mentions in the opening chapter that "the world needs to know about that country", means Gilman wants the world to know what is a real "woman" as she defined them in Herland as if women till then were new spices undefined. In *Herland*, women were having the same definition as patriarchy imposes on them (chaste, virgin, ultimate mothers) with a minute shift in activities and appearances in respect to men. Gilman perhaps forgets that the way she defines women in reference to the above bracketed terms is what patriarchy has created and established because in a patriarchal society a "woman" is all "body," so their identity is adhered to definition of body only. As Simone De Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* (1949) that men are considered universal so are left unmarked while women becomes "women" because they are marked, restricted and norms are imposed upon them.

Within the scope of the novel Gilman presents and essentializes the nature of men that if there exists a world dominated by men, then it is bound to be 'unsafe' and 'uncivilized' for women, which is clearly portrayed when Vandyck, the male narrator says "It looked safe and civilized enough" (Gilman, 15) as opposed to this nation of woman which appears to be "peaceful and sweet in expression" (Gilman, 147). So, for Gilman it is not

patriarchy that causes harm or problem but men. Does that mean Gilman equates only men with patriarchy? Then what about the rest of the genders who were considered non-existent? Were they not oppressed? Were bodies defined as “men” not a part of this oppressed group of “genders”? Then how come men become source of uncivilization? Gilman in generalizing “men” herself becomes patriarchal. Gilman forgets that any “body” trying to deviate from the “legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality” (Foucault, 38) was a victim of patriarchy and perhaps Gilman’s *Herland* aims towards creating such “ideal” pairings of “male” and “female” where the female is considered sex as only an “ideal” process to have a “child” and not for “pleasure” and as something they did not discuss much (as Gilman portrays so at the end of the novel) which then makes the novel adhere to what Michel Foucault said in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) that “The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality had more right to discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps but quieter” (Foucault, 38). The “legitimate couple” became such a “norm” that even it became a feature of “utopic” world of “women”.

Gilman describes a ‘woman’ in accordance to bodily values that is they need to be chaste, pure, protect their “virginity” from evils of men. In doing so, Gilman (like patriarchy does) dehumanizes women and reduces them as bodies without any sexual urge and desire and whose sole and “perfect identity” is to become a ‘pure mother’, as Gilman describes them with phrases- “parthenogenetic mothers” (Gilman, 75) “Maiden Aunts” (Gilman, 78) “Mother Earth bearing Fruits” (Gilman, 79) Vandyck describing Somel as giving “one the nice, smooth mother feeling... intelligence and dependableness...” (Gilman, 91) Ellador describing herself as “We are not like women of your country. We are Mothers... not specialized in this line.” (Gilman, 167) and when Gilman describes purified bodies of women as “Temple Mothers” (Gilman, 151) Gilman’s use of the above terms to describe the ultimate identity of ‘women’ as “mothers” which makes ‘women’ an object that creates its identity based on “purity.” We can refer to Adrienne Rich’s essay, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, where she mentions how lesbians were obliterated from literature and even from the mainstream feminist movement. She argues that society has made Heterosexuality “natural” so that it can be used as a violent political device to render women in a subordinate situation. Women are psychologically conditioned to think that they need to get a man to be sexually satisfied. They are restricted from enjoying the comfort of their own body with the same sex body. Lesbian motherhood is presented as inappropriate which forces women to accept heterosexuality as “natural” and obligatory and thereby fails to understand female sexual bonding is the only way that women can experience women identification. Gilman too perhaps moves within the vicious circle of patriarchy when she obliterated the queer aspect and ignores any possible lesbian relationship in her *Herland* by establishing only the two possible aspects of this “woman-land”- “mother-love” and “sister-love” (Gilman, 76), trying to cover up that “woman” can also be sexually attracted to another “woman”. Thus Gilman’s “feminism” excludes, assumes and works towards establishing heteronormativity. Gilman’s generalizing of “men” as source of evil, shows how through her “feminist” text she fails to individualize.

Gilman presents in *Herland*, an approach towards “compulsory public education” (Gilman, 85), a probable reference to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792) in which Wollstonecraft portrayed how women were secluded from public domain, educated only on subjects they need to know for entertaining men, how ‘education’ which is a right for all humans was necessarily ‘gendered’ and so Wollstonecraft argued for a “co-educational” structure where irrespective of gender humans can educate themselves and have a proper psychological growth. However, though this educational approach is included by Gilman for the women of the virgin land to emphasize that these women too have the right to education but perhaps obliterated the “co-educational” aspect that Wollstonecraft approached as a need for proper mental growth of all genders. Gilman perhaps turned the “public” aspect of education into “private” one! Gilman then categorizes “certain criminal types of women- perverts or crazy...” (Gilman, 92) reflecting what Foucault said, ‘power’ did, it produced through “scrutiny”, “what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad-men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex;...” (Foucault, 38). Gilman therefore in her novel did what patriarchy loves to do, implant the perverse.

A similarity can be drawn among Gilman’s *Herland*, Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694) and Patty Jenkins film *Wonder Woman* (2017). The similar ground where these three works lies is embodied patriarchy, for all these works fail to include, work towards empowering and protecting one gender assuming others are already empowered and secured, secluding one gender from the other to create the constructive “this/that” binary and presents men as evil. On the other hand considering male as the only and ultimate partner or no partner at all that is trying to establish the norm of either “legitimate couple” or becoming “asexual” beings at the end.

Thus we see how women in the novel is projected with stout, strong 'bodies' and short hairs, a society where does not even men exists, indicating on the fact that the bodies defined here as "woman" is at par with the features society associates as perfect definition of the bodies described as "man". Gilman the narrows down to the thought which society had always bannered to describe women that is women are women because they are not male, which indicates the fact that women have a castrated penis(a vagina), they are not full men so they are women. A society or community is a place for all socially categorized 'human bodies' to live together. In this novel perhaps we find a society which not only secludes a particular gender, obliterating all other possibilities within the mentioned gender but presents only three male characters in this novel to introduce heteronormativity, through whom the author narrates or presents the matriarchal society, with patriarchal reflections. Not then the novel justifies itself as a Feminist one.

A utopic society is an abstraction. Nothing can be utopic in matriarchal or patriarchal set up. Complete dehumanizing of any particular category of human being is in itself untopic. Secluding, categorizing strategic squares, fitting bodies in them, and trying to fix it only reflects a dystopia struggling to establish a norm which only reflects inequality. The seclusion itself provides limitation to its state of feminist utopia. If *Herland* is a feminist novel, it should have tried to resist patriarchy rather than presenting and essentializing a community with all patriarchal features defining "woman". The novel present supremacy of particular body named as "woman", by making the body adhere to the patriarchally constructed features of what a 'woman' is.

Thus, by using post-structuralist feminist theory I have come to the realization that the very concept of "utopia" is abstract; something which is practically not possible, for 'nature' evolves leading to infinite possibilities of any existence where no authentic definition can be ultimate. The very nature of creating a "perfect" stable point is patriarchal which Gilman perhaps tries to create in the novel. Gilman in *Herland* portrays a state, without flaws and imperfections in comparison to the world from where the men come. But this "utopic" land of women is just a product of power that has only dehumanized humans into patriarchally sanctioned definition of women in parameters to men, creating *Herland* as an untopic state that requires evolving and changing. Therefore, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* fumbles at the threshold of patriarchy when she considers only one gender as the victim of patriarchy and not the other genders. Seclusion of women, establishing their ultimate identities as "mothers", defining them in parameter to bodily values like "chastity" and "purity", Gilman only presents the loopholes of her text. Presenting men as patriarchal, making "legitimate" heterosexuality as the perfect conclusion of her novel *Herland*, turns the text into a 'un-utopic' feminist novel. Stanley Fish regards a text to have "infinite plurality" (Fish, 308) of meanings and it evolves and changes as there is no particular point where the meaning of anything could be "fixed" and Woolf Gang Iser regards a text to be "inexhaustible" (Iser, 285) as a text can be analyzed from numerous imaginations trying to fill the gaps provided in a text. Therefore, this dissertation has sought to present a possible rethinking of the novel *Herland* and has been an attempt to find out pluralities in its interpretations.

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