

Utopian Feminism: Envisioning Alternative Social Structure and Gender Roles in *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

¹Nidhi Chaurasiya, ²Dr Ravi Kumar Yadav

Research Scholar, Department of English, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur.

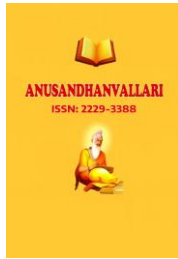
Abstract: Utopian Feminism comprehended as a sub genre of science and speculative fiction includes narratives exploring societies free from the shackles of patriarchy and subordination of women on the grounds of socio cultural norms that impart a secondary status to women in society. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) American humanist, novelist and eugenicist, an renowned figure of the suffrage movement has composed narratives of a society free from feminist fabulation and *Herland* is a characteristic contribution in the field imagining a women and no men land to posit a world of gender equality being inherently utopian idea as no one has ever witnessed a gender free society historically. The paper attempts to critically examine Perkins' idea of Utopian Feminism to enact political changes in order to challenge patriarchal world orders and new ways of creating world. While the critics view traditional utopias as distasteful, some reflect feminist utopian thinking as 'the not yet conscious' ideas and an alternative construction of gender . The paper attempts to throw light on these two views of the critics through *Herland* by Perkins.

Keywords: gender norms, alternative construction, utopian feminism

The concept of Utopian feminism is to dwell into alternative social structures that envision a society free from the patriarchal norms that suppress the status of women and impart her a secondary role in the social system. It often imagines new gender roles and systems in order to serve as a space for envisioning a more and just equitable future . At a deeper level the concept challenges patriarchy and norms that lead to subjugation of women and other marginalized groups of the society. Charlotte Perkins Gilman through her novel *Herland* has envisioned and created a narrative of society that is completely free from the constraints of the patriarchal oppression.

Herland by Perkins is a utopian fiction written in the year 1915 is dramatic version of confrontation between three men and all female society. Through the novel Gilman has created a political vacuum where the whole patriarchal system ideologies and consciousness cease to exist. *Herland* is an exemplar that greatly criticizes patriarchy and reflects concern for humanity , therefore it is considered as one of the best feminist works in American literature. However the world of *Herland* appears nightmarish , gothic and inhuman with least possibilities of growth as it is unnatural and against the rules of nature. One has to think about the natural order that has been made in the world by default in which men and women have to exist together, though of the opposite nature and abilities but as better half of one another.

In Philosophy the natural order is distinguished as a moral source from where the natural law seeks to derive its authority. As per the natural order the natural relationships of beings with one another happen in the absence of law but very much in accordance with the natural law which is reinforced by its own. On one hand in contrast to the natural law the divine law seeks to gain authority from God and positive law begets from the ruling government. But Perkins *Herland* is beyond these three laws and is something way out. Enlightenment was a group of the Physiocrats in 18th century that involved French philosophers who strongly believed in the idea that the world was governed by a natural order which allowed human beings to live together and Perkins' work



completely denies the natural order. They further stated that it was a ideal order that came from the divine creator of the world which was an idealistic model of a society to exist in harmony. The Chinese Taoism also states that there can be a good government only when there is a perfect harmony between the *Ways of Man* and *Ways of Nature*, which also is in true accordance with the natural order defined by the Physiocrats.

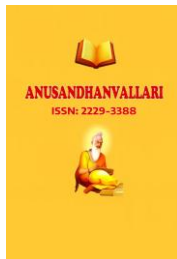
In *Herland* Gilman constructs a world which is a women's utopia out of the conviction in women's superiority over men and it is a paradise too perfect for women to exist as the attraction towards other sex is natural. The Radical One, Head of the Traditional Women's Rights Activists at *What's Wrong With Equal Rights* has written two posts addressing the fundamental relationship between man and woman particularly their duties in which the duty of man is to care for woman and give woman privileges consistent with women's gender roles and nature as women :

The Radical One also in turn focuses on women's duty to obey men and accept authority from men and to rely upon outside male support in cases where conflict against a man is necessary because the man is in the wrong and to remind women of the dangers of taking on male duties when a man is not taking charge and providing support as he should. A woman who fills in the void doing for the man what the man should be doing on behalf of others runs the risk of creating a long term problem. The man should be pressured and forced to live up to his responsibilities in the family rather than the woman taking on a masculine role in the family to make up for the dereliction of duty on the man's part. It states :

"I believe it is the obligation of men to be chivalrous to women. I believe this duty to be *unconditional*. That means even if the woman acts bad I still believe it is the duty of men to protect and provide for women. I believe that women have special circumstances in life and the differences between the sexes warrant special consideration and protections for women. I believe it is the duty of men to elevate the interests of women above their own and the responsibility of adults to elevate the interests of children above their own. Women are inherently more vulnerable and weaker than men and are in need of special protections and guardianship in marriage. I believe it to be the duty of the husband to provide for his wife and be responsible for her. I do not believe this duty to be reciprocal. Marriage was never meant to be an 'equal partnership.'" (The Natural Order of Relations between Men and Women at the Personal and Political Level July 13, 2014 by Jesse Powell TFA)

In *Herland* three American guys discover a land without men which is quite similar to a beehive without drones. The novel is mildly humorous and is a mixture of both serious and comic themes. *Herland* is shown to have existed for 2000 years without men and is consisting of only women and girls. The country is an iconic model of beauty, cleanliness, order and peace and is completely free from war, crime and civil unrest. It is disease free and has no poverty. The idealism reflected in the novel is too much that is why it is categorized as utopian. As in many cases it has been observed even in the real life that women choose to live alone a happier life rather than in conjugal terms. Paul Dolan, a Professor of Behavioural Science at the London School of Economics and the author of *Happy Ever After: A Radical New Approach to Living Well* reflects : "If you are a man, you should probably get married; if you are a woman, don't bother." In this context he gives a reference to a study of *American Time Use* which compared the level of happiness and unhappiness of married , and unmarried, divorced people to reflect that the unmarried childless women were the happiest population of all.

However above is not the end point to support the intuitive skill of Perkins behind composition of *Herland* because in some ways a committed relationship and marriage can translate to financial support and loneliness but it also raises questions about the forms of personal and emotional security like uncompromised living arrangements , sleeping in the middle of the bed and investing enough time in personal wellness. According to Dr Kimber Shelton, a Texas based psychologist women are happier and healthier living alone and she explains :



“research continues to show that in comparison to men, women in heterosexual relationships who work outside of the home continue to take on most of the household responsibilities and childcare labor. Working, coming home to cook, clean, attend to children, and meet their partner’s needs leaves little room for consideration of self.”

She explain that the role of a woman as caregiver can make her responsible for her family's health and wellness and this is the reason why it makes men happier to be in a heterosexual relationship which they tend to live longer and feel much happier than single men. Meanwhile married women in heterosexual relationship become more responsible and overburdened hence on an average they die earlier , are sick and unmaintained most of the times and express less happiness than single women who are financially strong and independent on taking their own important decisions of the life. Therefore Dr Shelton adds :

If happiness is tied to having more time and space for self-noticing and self-nurturing, then there are many reasons why women may wish to delay or forfeit marriage and, instead, tend to themselves. “Single women can focus on their needs and wants. If they prioritize their health and wellness, there is the space and opportunity to have these needs met,” adds Dr. Shelton.

However in the real world generalizations about gender can be dangerous particularly over generalizations. In her work *Herland* Perkins has pointed to a no man's world which is peaceful and has no wars or conflicting issues leading to wars which showcases that women are very quiet and peace loving and they always exist in and create harmony. In real world there are examples which reflect that war is something that cannot be eliminated by human mind irrespective of being a man or a woman. A small fraction of wars have been started by women and Cleopatra launched a war against Egypt, Queen Anne of Britain also started a war in North America named after her, in 1971 India Gandhi the Indian Prime Minister waged a war against Pakistan and in 1973 a surprise attack on Israel by Arabs on holy day of Jews a brief war was launched by then Prime Minister Golda Meir and also Margret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of UK started a war against Falkland Islands which was termed unfair at the global level. Thus the reality stands different to what Perkins claims of her utopian feminism.

In the context of crime women may engage themselves in malfeasance but majority of violent crimes are committed by males. Some women may lean towards competition and men towards collaboration but on an average women tend to be more collaborative which in the commercial field leads to more input and buy-in decisions and decision making. As far as the work life balance is concerned women have led the call for more work life balance but the balance is finally disturbing the natural order when a world of only women would mean that women have to choose among lesbianism , autoeroticism and asexuality. The male female tension rate in recent years have accelerated in recent years and have given rise to more than 50% divorce rates therefore monosexuality becomes an open question.

Utopian feminism is a utilization of the power of imagination to explore possibilities of new ways of life and societies that may go beyond the current social order or natural order fostering a sense of hope and inspiring action towards a more just future. The three men who visit Herland want to hazard the bi-sexual procreation and so they wish to experiment with fatherhood to round out what motherhood has been able to accomplish (Doskow 1999, p 21). The three men are engaged with one woman each of the Herland and marry but only two marriages become successful and Terry's marriage with Alima does not progress smoothly. The book ends with the banishment of Terry when he wishes to rape Alima.

Herland is a landmark in the world of Utopian fiction and a stark contrast between Herland and the real world raises lot of questions related to the social and natural order of the world which is quite different in Herland. There are serious questions that Gilman raises in the work : *What would human civilisation would be and what women would have done if the entire world would have been in women's hand for past 2000*

years? In order to find answers to such questions Gilman has used a radical separation tactic and in this she not only creates a political vacuum in which the entire patriarchal system ceases to exist but also men are done away with all together.

As the novel was released Gilman received a lot of attention as well as criticism for writing and imagining things beyond the social and natural order :

Nan Albinski (1988) recognized Gilman as “the best-known feminist utopist of the early twentieth century, largely because of the strength of *Herland*” (p. 68). Freibert (1983) even regarded *Herland* as “the first truly feminist work in the American tradition” (p. 67). Wu-Qing-yun did a very good summary of *Herland*’s criticism since 1977. He put the criticism into three categories: the politically positive, the politically negative, and the aesthetic. The positive group regards *Herland* as a classic text for its depiction of ideal utopian worlds.

Carol Pearson was the first critic to notice the surprisingly numerous areas of consensus between contemporary feminist utopias and *Herland*. However Gilman has never addressed women’s development because the three female characters in *Herland* have not changed themselves as wives, they marry three male travellers out of the initial reason that they value men for their reproductive capabilities, therefore the idea of placing men in this society is done only on a limited scale and to some extent proves author’s point. Throughout marriages the two male travellers appreciate *Herland* women and their culture but marriages fail to aid women in developing a sense of sexual intimacy which is a romantic view of marriage. Gilman’s belief in this context is hollow as while showing her belief in women’s superiority she seems to completely deny sexuality in *Herland*.

The novel showcases the time of mid 19th century when there were no reliable means of birth control and women conceived very easily. This was the reason that social roles of middle class women were narrowed to child rearing and they completely lost their prestige and productive roles that they previously enjoyed in the agrarian economy and society. The only way left for them to recover their lost genteel was by promoting the angel in the house images and women’s domesticity along with purging sexual associations. However major changes took place in the early 1920s that emphasized sexual liberation and pleasure. While *Herland* was composed in 1915, women’s utopian representation in *Herland* is caught precisely between these two ideological moments or two distinct periods of feminism.

Pearson listed the area of consensus in which he discussed about absence of men, the deurbanized and decentralized anarchy, a nurturing ethic, relationships based on love between mother and daughter, worship of mother as a goddess and mothering as a social function. (Wu, 1995, p 150)

Johanna Russ 1981 in *Recent Feminist Utopias* insisted on separating contemporary feminist utopias from *Herland* out of the reason that *Herland* was more responsive towards the women’s movement of its time while the other contemporary feminist utopias were not only contemporaneous with these all feminine utopias that fail to convince women who do not want to do away with men, but would surely believe in seeing the world in a way where women and men live together with dignity and equal rights.

Women utopias are considered as important literary tools in promoting social changes in the world. However Gilman did not consider man and woman equal and she held the idea that women are superior to men with regard to human race as a whole. Gilman wishes to see a tumultuous reform in gender issues therefore she belongs to those feminist writers who underline gender differences, biological determinism and women’s superiority over men. Gilman has reflected men as the main and only source of problem for women in the society but there have been examples in the history as well as in present scenarios when women also pose problems for other women in the society. She reflects men as the cause of all social ills and therefore the absence of men from *Herland* results in the absence of their characteristic traits.

Thus Gilman's dream of a female utopian society which is calm, peaceful and without war and violence is a dream only as the real life situations differ and for which the exemplars have been already presented. The utopia has been too perfect and out of the world where though women live in Herland but still marry three men in the novel which means that they cannot suppress the natural order framed by the divine to love in the world, thus a dream of just women living in a land without men is unnatural and out of the natural order with which the world has been made by the creator. She reflects :

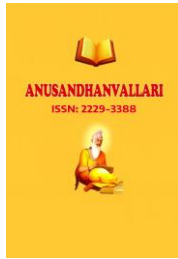
Alcohol or drugs do not exist in Herland. There are no dangerous animals. Cats are bred to destroy mice but not birds. All plants produce nutritious nuts or fruits.

This utopian system seems to be quite naive from today's standards. Globally while men are more prone to alcohol addiction females are also experiencing higher rates of alcohol related deaths and an increase in alcohol use and misuse. Some of the statistics research indicates that alcohol use and misuse are on the rise among women, with larger increases in alcohol-related emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and deaths compared to men in the past 20 years. In 2016, 3.0 million deaths worldwide were attributable to alcohol, with 2.3 million among men and 0.7 million among women. Thus Gilman's claim of non addiction of alcohol and drugs in case of women who according to her are termed as flag bearers of peace and harmony is unfortunately a utopian dream only as women equally tend to addiction as men.

This utopian system seems obviously quite naïve from today's standards. The female body is a recurrent presence throughout the productions of world culture over thousands of years and is still the focus of different and multifarious schools of criticism. Plato differentiates between the world of appearances, which is unstable and untrue, and the intelligible world which is stable and true. The physical body, as an element pertaining to the former, can and does change over time. The soul, on the other hand is an element pertaining to the latter because of its inherent permanency (McEachern, 1997, pp. 86-87). Therefore body in Plato is negatively constructed. It is gendered "female" and rendered weak, passive, silent, and self-denying. This is also generally the Western configuration of the body.

Works Cited

- [1] Albinski, N. B. (1988). Women's utopias in British and American fiction. London: Croom Helm.
- [2] Atwood, M. (1986). The Handmaid's tale. New York: Anchor Books.
- [3] Barr, M. (Ed.).(1981). Future females: A critical anthology.
- [4] Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- [5] Bartkowski, F. (1989). Feminist utopias. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- [6] Cornford, F. (1945). The republic of Plato. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Davidson, A. E. (1988). Future tense making history. In K. VanSpankeren & J. G. Castro (Eds.), The handmaid's tale. Margaret Atwood: Vision and forms (pp. 113-121). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- [8] Dobris, C. A. (1989). Weaving the utopian vision: A rhetorical analysis of feminist utopian fiction. Diss. Indiana University. Duskow, M. (1999). Introduction. In M.
- [9] Duskow (Ed.), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novels: Moving the mountain, Herland, and With her in ourland (pp. 9-29). Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- [10] Elliot, R. C. (1970). The shape of utopia: Studies in a literary genre. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- [11]Freibert, L. M. (1983). World views in Utopian novels by women. In M. Barr and N. D. Smith (Eds.), Women and utopia (pp. 67-84). New York: University Press of America.
- [12]Gilman, C. P. (1914). The man-made world, or our androcentric culture. New York, Charlton Co..



-
- [13] Gilman, C. P. (1966). Women and economics: A study of the economic relation between men and women as a factor in social evolution. C. N. Degler (Ed.). New York: Harper & Row.