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Imagining Alternative Realities: *Herland* and *Sultana's Dream* as Works of Feminist Utopias

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the elements of a feminist utopia in two ground breaking works of feminist fiction - one in the western world, and the other in the Indian subcontinent. The chosen works are Herland, written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1915, and Sultana's Dream written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain in 1905. These two works envision a feminist utopia which is separatist in nature, i.e., the men are either eliminated or almost excluded from the workings of their society. Through the societies depicted in these works, the authors want to convey that fact that the world can become a better place if both the sexes are treated as equals. These works aim to end the oppression against women by describing them as equals and capable as men in every aspect of life. By choosing to depict societies that are separatist in nature, it becomes a unique way to voice their opinions. Both of these works bear a lot of similarities with each other, which is why they have been chosen to be discussed.

Keywords: Feminist, utopia, women, equality, freedom

According to American Heritage dictionary, Utopia is "an ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political and moral aspects." Feminist utopia then, envisions an ideal place with equality of both the sexes, by means of depicting women as capable as men in every aspect of life. It becomes an important medium of political expression through which women are able to raise their voices to end sexual oppression.

Feminist utopias challenge male centric narratives to the very core, bringing to the forefront female centric narratives and normalizing them. According to Frances Bartkowski, "The feminist utopian novel is a place where theories of power can be addressed through the construction of narratives that test and stretch the boundaries of power in its operational details" (5). Here, misconceptions regarding "femininity" and "masculinity" are dismantled

and patriarchal power structures are questioned in a unique way. Therefore, feminist fiction needs to be "thoughtfully considered as unique tools for investigating manifestations of power and extrapolating new directions for feminist discourse"(Welser 8). The below discussion on the two works will show how feminist utopias confront social problems and suggest ways to rectify them to create a better world for women.

Herland, written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman was written in 1915 and serialized in the periodical *Forerunner*. Rediscovered in 1970, this revolutionary work is a prime example of matriarchal utopian fantasy. It envisions an alternative reality and provides a scathing commentary on universal male privilege. The novel depicts three men named Jeff, Van and Terry who land into an all female society called Herland. Product of the western civilization, their psyche is deeply rooted in sexism, which undergoes a change once they start to observe the near perfect society that has been run by only women. Reversing the roles and power structures, the story offers a significant alternative view of female citizenship.
Through intense conversations between the Herlanders and the men, the author mocks the androcentric norms which are prevalent in the outside world. Through the workings of Herland, she puts forward the gynocentric norms and normalizes them. Upon meeting the inhabitants of Herland, the trio is immediately confronted by the limitations of their preconceived notions regarding femininity, the same notions which commonly informed social practices of Gilman's day (Welser 20). The narratives regarding the female physicality are challenged, as the women of Herland are described as "fir-dark valley dwellers", "sunburned plainswomen" and "agile foresters" (Gilman 58) in the eyes of three men. These women are swift runners and seasoned climbers. Also, they have short hair because they are not aware of the notions of feminine and masculine physicality in the western patriarchal society. No wonder the men call them "unfeminine". The trio's notions regarding women being weak and submissive in Van's words as "we seemed to think that if there were men, we could fight them, and if there were only women – why there would be no obstacles at all"(Gilman 28), are burst when they see the Herlanders as surprisingly athletic and confident. These women are unaware of the gender constructs of heterosexual society; therefore they believe that women are naturally sturdy and strong. These women play outdoor games and gymnastics – which are mostly considered a male territory. Gilman describes them as refreshingly athletic women who are "erect, serene, standing sure footed and light as any pugilist" (Gilman 26). The men are baffled by the way these women look - their appearance doesn't conform to their definitions of femininity: "they were not, in the girl sense beautiful" (25). Their personality exudes confidence as they are not even a little intimidated while conversing with the men. Their fearless nature and bold attitude fascinates the narrator, who till now was being accustomed to women being shy and timid. Through this, Gilman challenges the patriarchal society that shuns outspoken women. Women of Herland are free to voice their opinion without feeling the fear of being judged and oppressed. "The way the

women look and also how they behave is the first manifestation of what is to come; the girls display a confidence and physical strength that the men are surprised to see in women" (Espelid 24).

Herland is devoid of poverty, jealousy, warfare, hunger and other unspeakable vices. This makes it an actual civilized country. Here women are "highly skilled, efficient, caring for their country as a florist cares for his costliest orchids" (Gilman 52). They are in charge of running the different departments with exceptional expertise. Gilman vehemently challenges the notion of sociological superiority that women are not suited to work in certain departments made for men. In the beginning, while noticing the nearly perfect country with carefully planned architecture, Jennings chuckles, "why this is a civilized country! ... there must be men" (Gilman 44). The trio is certain that such thoughtful task of planning is undoubtedly the result of a man's mind. There is no acknowledgement that women too can be skilled and intelligent enough to plan the architecture of a place. Herland women manage such departments and professions which are unquestionably labeled as a male's territory with effortless conduct. The notion that women cannot work in a harmonious and efficient manner is dismantled by portraying Herland women running the country without any complications and impediments.

The idea of motherhood is central to Herland. The women here give birth through a process called *Parthenogenesis* which doesn't require the participation of men and which gives birth to only girls. This is a bold stroke employed by Gilman while creating a feminist utopia. The process of *Parthenogenesis* exhibits female self sufficiency - as a result, male supremacy is eliminated. Women are no longer dependent on men for the force of procreation.

The "femininity" of the women in terms of motherhood is questioned by Terry who represents the western worldview. To provide best possible life to the children with ample resources and also to control population, women of Herland who give birth to only one child becomes a source of contempt for Terry. In his world, the more children a woman bears, the more motherly and caring she is believed to be, thus fitting into the social constructs of "femininity". Terry declares: "A less feminine lot I ever saw. A child apiece doesn't seem enough to develop what I called motherliness" (Gilman 97). This in turn brutally attacks the women who are not able to bear any children as being devoid of motherly emotions. In addition, the process of reproduction requires having sex between the partners, therefore a women deciding to bear only one child limits her sexual activity, thus in a sense, giving her control over her body, something which is not quite acceptable in the "outside world". However, through intense discussions and closely observing their process of child rearing, Van's conception of femininity undergoes a change and he is able to separate femininity from female sexuality:

> "These women, whose essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture, were strikingly deficient in what we call 'femininity'. This led me very promptly to the conviction that

> those 'feminine charms' we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity – developed to please us because they had to please us and in no way essential to the real fulfillment of their great process" (Gilman 78).

The concept of marriage and home in western culture is entirely unknown to the women. Having lived in a genderless society with no men and working as a collective unit, these women don't understand the need and desire of the custom of marriage. The men try to explain to them the construction of marriage and gender roles in a family, which entirely seem absurd to them. The first unreasonable custom the women come across is women taking her husband's name after the marriage. In Herland, women don't have surnames; therefore they feel a sense of equality among themselves. Alima is agitated when Terry asserts that a woman taking her husband's surname is a sign of possession and "that shows everyone that you are my wife" (Gilman 156). This naturally indicates that a woman is her husband's property. To these women, marriage seems as a "loss of identity for women, as one's lost name" (Espelid 36).

The concept of home as the central economic unit doesn't conform to the lifestyle of Herlanders. Here the women are economically independent and child rearing is practiced as a collective effort, therefore rationale and the concept of home is entirely missing from their knowledge. Biographer Ann Lane describes Gilman's view: "the Home is an institution like any other … It is not a private, healthful, restful place; it is where we suffer the most. It is an institution owned by man, in which wife and children are forcibly held, forcibly by virtue of economic dependence and ideological pressure" (57). The social construct of women resorting to domestic life in her home whole men go out to work and earn appears ridiculous to these women. "Gilman's mono-gendered society removes men from the economic picture entirely in order to demonstrate the growth potential of women (and consequently, society) when these constraints are eliminated" (Welser 22).

The spiritual power in Herland is understandably recognized in maternal terms. Curious about the religion of Herland, Van asks Ellador about their God. He is fascinated by her reply when he comes to know they see the pervading spirit in female terms: "in trying to get close to it in our minds we personify the idea, naturally; but we certainly do not assume a Big Woman somewhere who is God. What we call God is a pervading power, you know, an Indwelling spirit, something inside of us that we want more of" (149). He confesses that in their world they recognize God as a male spirit. The theology of Herland imagines the divine as female, thus imagining the culture of female as divine (Clemons 10).

The women are evidently reluctant of the conjugal privileges of consummating the marriage since they don't live in a heterosexual society. Procreation is done through parthenogenesis; therefore the necessity of male force has been eliminated from their society. Sexual activity

for reasons other than reproduction is met with shocking responses. Ellador is confused when Van deems it normal for wedded couples to indulge in such relations "in season and out of season, with no thought of children" (167). Van's efforts to convince Ellador fail, and he slowly finds a new way to be intimate with her and feel the love. Overcoming his sexual desire for Ellador, he observes: "I found that much, very much of what I had honestly supposed to be a physiological necessity was a psychological necessity" (77). Terry is not able to overcome his frustration and considering it as his right as a husband, tries to rape his wife Alima. As a result, he is evicted from Herland. Gilman here conveys that a woman has the right over her own body, and that consent is necessary no matter what.

Herland, thus urges us to reevaluate our preconceived notions regarding genders, and most importantly, it makes us recognize that women can work equally as men, if their intellect and capacity is acknowledged. In addition, it vehemently states that a woman can live her life on her own terms and she doesn't need validation from the patriarchal society.

Another feminist utopia is envisioned in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*, which was published about a decade before Herland. Both of these stories imagine alternative realities with striking similarities – men force is weakened or completely eliminated due to wars, the society is free from any diseases or other vices, women are strong and independent due to compulsory education, and both societies are continuously devoted to cultivation of gardens and farming activity.

In *Sultana's Dream*, the author offers a sharp critique of the gendered oppression of women in the Indian subcontinent by imagining a society called "Ladyland", where women are the primary contributors in running and maintaining it. Sultana dreams about visiting Ladyland along with Sister Sara who is the resident of that place. Women in the times of Hossain were deemed unfit to step outside the home, believing them to be weak and unworthy of the outside world. They were expected to adhere to the norm of staying inside the home and handling the domestic life - whether they wanted it or not. But things in Ladyland appear unusual to her.

In the Ladyland, these roles are reversed. Where, in Sultana's world, women were kept segregated in 'zenana', cut off from the outside world; in ladyland, the men are kept inside the 'mardana' for the same reason. They are segregated from rest of the world outside and are required to do all the domestic work. In contrast, the women fearlessly work outside the home and manage all the civic duties of their land. The men are depicted as weak and submissive while the women are depicted totally the opposite of it. Hossain brilliantly conveys this idea by the use of satire:

> "'The women say you look very mannish.' 'Mannish?' said I, 'what do they mean by that?' 'They mean that you are shy and timid like men.'" (Hossain 1)

It seems unusual and at times a little farfetched to think that women can roam freely in the streets without the fear of being groped at. But in Ladyland, it is common for the women to

walk around unveiled, without any hesitation. Sultana's fears are debased by Sister Sara when she declares: "You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here" (Hossain 4). Hossain takes a jibe when she points out that the Ladyland is free from the vices because there are no men to be found outside, which is a brutal attack on their temperament.

The author makes interesting reversal of behavior of both the sexes - the women are bold and confident, and the men are shy and full of nervousness. They are expected to stay inside and cook for women, and feel shy at the sight of women. This would seem utterly unimaginable in the real world. Sister Sara and Sultana cover their bodies with full clothes while entering the kitchen so that men don't feel shy. "The complete reversal of situation is nothing but striking back the community of men through a total retaliation" (Reza 208).

The fact that the Ladyland is a feminist utopia can be observed through the ruler of their society - a woman they call the "Queen". The Queen is depicted as a compassionate and thoughtful ruler who is really fond of science. Extremely considerate about the education of girls, she lays great emphasis on learning new techniques of science and utilizing them to their benefit. "If anything, women are depicted as far more fit for the benefits of education than men, who waste their opportunities on silly things like bombs, not gardens. (Subramanian)"

The notion of men regarding the uselessness of education for women is dismantled by the women of Ladyland. The misogynist belief that women cannot work with intellect is evident in the lines:

> "When they came to know that the female universities were able to draw water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun, they only laughed at the members of the universities and called the whole thing 'a sentimental nightmare!'" (Hossain 8).

Hossain asserts women's intellectual capacity by describing how they have been successful in creating innovative techniques to use their resources fully and wisely. Thus Sister Sara tells Sultana how the women invented a balloon that was kept afloat in the air from which "they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased" (Hossain 8). They also invented an instrument (Solar mirrors in modern parlance) through which they could collect as much heat from the sun as they wanted. One innovation that fascinated Sultana was the incredible "air car" that sister Sara spontaneously created in no time:

> "Then she screwed a couple of seats onto a square piece of plank. To this plank she attached two smooth well polished balls … she said they were hydrogen balls and they were used to overcome the force of gravity … She then fastened to the air - car two wing - like blades, which she said, were worked by electricity" (Hossain 13).

It was their intellect and brainpower that helped the women fight against the enemies that attacked their land – they used their innovations to direct the sun's rays towards the enemy and they fled because the heat was too much for them to bear. The methods of cultivation and

modes of transfer are efficiently managed by the women with the help of electricity, therefore, there is less manual labour requires also a lot of time is saved. Through this, Hossain brilliantly debases the prevailing notion that women are not suited for scientific fields and are devoid of intellect.

The question of religion of this utopian land intrigues Sultana. She asks sister Sara about their religion to which she replies: "Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and be truthful" (Hossain 12 - 13). The simplicity of the religion complements the peaceful atmosphere of the Ladyland. It is contrary to the outside world, where women are oppressed in the name of religion by giving absurd explanations. Their movements are controlled by exaggerating religious principles to suit the patriarchal structure of the society.

The women in Ladyland are responsible for the smooth management of their society. Here, "all civic duties are managed in a few hours, thanks to the extreme efficiency that comes naturally to women" (Murad). Men of the Ladyland are described as lazy and inefficient, who unapologetically dawdle for most part of the day. As a result, they are kept in the 'mardana' so that they don't hamper the time efficient workings of the Ladyland.

Here, the women are shown as the saviours of their society because when the enemy attacked, they used their creativity to combat them. While the men of their society were exhausted from the warfare and willingly retired to the 'mardana', these women tirelessly fought for their country and its citizens. They were not the damsels in distress, waiting for men to rescue them; rather they became recognized their capacity and became their own strength.

As feminist utopias, *Herland* and *Sultana's Dream* emphatically state a vision of how positively the society would transform if women were placed at equal pedestal with men and allow to fully participate as citizens. These utopias predict that society can be peaceful, kind and efficient if its women are independent and enjoy equal freedom in every aspect. The way they confront the problems of sexual oppression and absurd notions regarding femininity is undoubtedly unique, which makes these works a prime example of feminist fiction.

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