



HERLAND AND CHARLOTTE PERKIN GILMAN'S UTOPIAN SOCIAL VISION OF WOMEN AND SOCIETY

(*Herland* dan Visi Wanita Masyarakat Utopia Charlotte Perkin Gilman)

Shahizah Ismail Hamdan & Ravichandran Vengadasamy

ABSTRACT

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel, *Herland*, is regarded by many as the pioneering feminist utopian novel. Authored in 1915 (but published as a monograph only in 1978), *Herland* is intended as a social critique, and as a sociological theorist, Gilman sees herself as a change agent for a better social life for women especially, as well as society in general. Like other intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century, Gilman struggled to theorise her social vision, whilst simultaneously placing great efforts at promoting her vision in a package that is attractive to the masses. By self-consciously distancing herself from the intellectuals of her time, she crafted her works as endeavours at transforming society. With the utopian novel as her genre of choice, Gilman provides readers with a deeper sense of understanding of the ills of a society that subscribes to and is fixated with masculinity. As such, it is the contention of this paper to discuss Gilman's second novel, *Herland* as a feminist utopian novel critiquing some aspects of culture Gilman describes as androcentric and to briefly link the images portrayed by Gilman in *Herland* to the Jungian theory of archetypes with some reference to female archetypal images.

Keywords: Utopia, Feminism, Social critique, Motherhood, Androcentrism

ABSTRAK

Novel *Herland*, karya Charlotte Perkin Gilman, dilihat sebagai pelopor novel feminis bersifat utopia. Novel ini yang ditulis pada tahun 1915 (tetapi hanya diterbitkan sebagai sebuah monograf pada tahun 1978) dimaksudkan sebagai kritikan sosial kerana sebagai seorang ahli teori sosiologi, Gilman melihat dirinya sebagai agen perubahan yang inginkan kehidupan yang lebih baik untuk wanita khususnya dan juga untuk masyarakat pada umumnya. Seperti cendekiawan abad ke 20 yang lain, Gilman bergiat untuk membentuk teori visi sosial beliau agar boleh difahami dan diterima oleh masyarakat. Dengan menggunakan genre utopia sebagai pilihan, Gilman memberi pembaca peluang untuk memahami lebih mendalam lagi keburukan masyarakat yang taksu dengan agenda maskulin. Oleh itu, artikel ini membincangkan novel kedua Gilman sebagai novel feminis utopia yang mengutarakan aspek-aspek androsentrik masyarakat. Artikel ini juga membincangkan paparan arketaip wanita dan aspek-aspek kewanitaan dalam novel *Herland* yang berkaitan dengan teori arketaip Jung.

Kata kunci: Utopia, Feminisme, Kritikan sosial, Faktor keibuan, Androcentrisme

INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, is regarded by many as a feminist utopian novel (Cannon and De La Rosa 2001; Landon 2002; Cavalcanti in Baccolini and Moyland 2003). In fact, Landon (2002) reinforces this view by stating that the novel *Herland* establishes Gilman as a pioneering utopian feminist writer. Authored in 1915 (but published as a monograph only in 1978), *Herland* is intended as a social critique, and as a sociological theorist, Gilman sees herself as a change agent for a better social life for women especially, as well as society in general. In addition, Gilman also regards herself as a humanist (Lane in Gilman 1979). According to Lane, Gilman frequently states that,

“[t]he most important fact about the sexes, men and women, is the common humanity we share... But women are denied autonomy... Men, too, suffer from personalities distorted by their habits of dominance and power. A healthy social organism for both men and women, therefore, requires the autonomy of women” (xv).

Like other intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century, Gilman struggled to theorise her social vision, whilst simultaneously placing great efforts at promoting her vision in a package that is attractive to the masses. By self-consciously distancing herself from the intellectuals of her time, she crafted her works as endeavours at transforming society (Lane: 1979). With the utopian novel as her genre of choice, Gilman provides readers with a deeper sense of understanding of the ills of a society that subscribes to and is fixated with masculinity.

As such, it is the contention of this paper to discuss Gilman's second novel, *Herland* as a feminist utopian novel critiquing some aspects of culture Gilman describes as androcentric and to briefly link the images portrayed by Gilman in *Herland* to the Jungian theory of archetypes with some reference to female archetypal images. *Herland* tells the story of three male travellers, Vandyck Jennings - a sociologist and also the narrator, Jeff Margrave - a doctor, and Terry O. Nicholson – a lady's man, a man of leisure and explorer. Together they discover Herland, a society of women who have developed their own industry, education and law. The women have also reappropriated religion, motherhood and childcare – all without the presence of any man – to suit their existence. This forces the three men to re-examine their view of society, the role of men and women and the idea of “progress”.

POPULAR THEMES IN FEMINIST UTOPIAN WRITINGS

Utopian fiction, in general, is commonly defined as:

A fictional narrative whose central theme is an imaginary state or community, sometimes with the corollary that such a state should be idealised or that it should contain an implied critique of an existing society or societies. Darko Suvin has argued that the imaginary community of a utopia must be ‘organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community’... (from *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Wolfe G.K. 1986).

The term is also often associated with works that deal with the transcending of human boundaries or surpassing of reality and social orders (Wolfe 1986). However, originating from Thomas More's 1516 writing, *Utopia* (in Greek, meaning “no place”), the utopian concept, which in a sense always refers to ‘elsewhere but here’, provides a feeling of home and hope. Hence Freedman (2000) argues that, though paradoxical, utopia is important

because it “is not only a theory of sociality – of the unalienated classless homeland of a postrevolutionary future – but, no less fundamentally, of psychology as well” (65). Thus it is apt that Gilman utilises the utopian genre to inject change into a society filled with men and women with “distorted personalities”.

According to Landon (2002) women writers began dealing with utopian settings in the early 1900s, starting with Gilman (*Herland* 1915), Francis Stevens (*The heads of Cerberus* and *The thrill book* 1919) and Katharine Burdekin (*Swastika night* 1937). Friebert (cited in Cannon and De La Rosa 2001) identifies five core themes commonly portrayed in feminist utopian novels (including *Herland*). The first theme is the change in economic systems. Within this shift, the utopian societies provide food, education, transportation, medical care and recreation at common expense and all properties are for common use. The second theme is the creation of alternative modes of childcare and homecare. In relation to first theme, childcare and homecare are done more communally as opposed to one woman, isolated as wife and mother, taking care of one household. The third theme deals with assertion of identity, especially for women, as the new societies do away with family names. The fourth deals with job divisions or “occupational specialization”. Within this theme women are portrayed as having the freedom to move into any specialization regardless of their gender. So women are seen carrying out non-traditional jobs. The final theme is freedom, where in these utopian societies women “are protected” in the sense that they are no longer threatened by male violence. Women do not fear possibilities of rape or assault because society’s inclination is more towards community concern rather than personal fulfilment. These themes are significant as attempts at removing boundaries seen as detriment to women in contemporary societies as “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present”. (Bloch cited in Freedman 2000: 67).

HERLAND AND ANDROCENTRISM

Gilman claims that culture, in general, is androcentric in nature. This has been the case at least since history was written. She says “[o]ur historic period is not very long. Real written history only goes back a few thousand years, beginning with the stone records of ancient Egypt. During this period we have had almost universally what is here called an Androcentric Culture. The history, such as it was, was made and written by men” (Gilman 1970). In her book *Our Androcentric Culture, or The Man-made World* (1970, first published in 1911), Gilman argues at length how culture, which includes all aspects of humanness, family, health and beauty, art, literature, games and sport, ethics and religion, education, society and fashion, law and government, crime and punishment, politics and warfare, and industry and economics are all man-made. She says, “[a]cting on this assumption, all human standards have been based on male characteristics, and when we wish to praise the work of a woman, we say she has ‘a masculine mind’” (1970). She explains that there are three distinct fields in life – “masculine, feminine and human”. The “masculine” is the man’s sphere, the “feminine” is the woman’s sphere and then that of humanity “which belongs to both alike”.

However, the masculine field has evolved to be defined as the human sphere and the women are left with a very small area to develop. If she so wishes to cross the boundary, she will be deemed unfeminine, undesirable or even “monstrous” (Gilman in Lane and O’Sullivan 1999). As a result of this misconception on the spheres and nature of human, Gilman tirelessly argues that the only way to correct society is through education – for both man and woman - and she identifies three key areas in need of change: the unnatural subordination of women through economic dependence, the myth of domestic life and the improper care and education of children. Together with *Our Androcentric Culture*, *Herland*

becomes not just Gilman's medium of critique of the androcentric nature of society, the novel also becomes a means of educating the society. This is evident in the context of the novel where the three male characters, Vandyck Jennings, Jeff Margrave and Terry O. Nicholson were slowly educated to the ways of Herland by their female tutors.

One of Gilman's most evident concerns projected in her sociological writings including the novel *Herland* is the notion of motherhood and womanhood. Women, who are mothers, are expected to be responsible not just for childbearing but also childcare. However, in *Herland's* utopian society, the responsibility of parentage and childcare is privatised and shifted solely to those who are capable as it is considered a "supreme task" (Gilman 1979: 82). Women in Herland are not expected to care for their children if they feel they are not prepared to do so. Vandyck, however, is not convinced with the notion of motherhood in Herland. The idea that a child is taken care of by another and not by the birth-mother is a difficult concept for him to accept, "the poor mother- bereaved of her baby-" (83), despite the fact that Somel, his tutor, tries very hard to explain the practicality of the system which liberates women to participate in other professions as they have been relieved of childcare. This, however, does not mean that the women have been relieved of motherhood:

"Oh no!" she earnestly assured me. "Not in the least bereaved. It is her baby still – it is with her – she has not lost it. But she is not the only one to care for it. There are others whom she knows to be wiser. She knows it because she has studied as they did, practiced as they did, and honors their real superiority. For the child's sake, she is glad to have for it this highest care." (83).

In *Our androcentric culture* Gilman (1970) stresses the same point that as a woman, motherhood is her main purpose in life, but as a human being, she has the freedom to opt for other occupations more appropriate to her personality and ability. In other words, in Herland motherhood does not confine women to the domestic domain. In fact it liberates and motivates them as observed by the three male visitors:

"All the surrendering devotion our women have put into their private families, these women put into their country and race. /all the loyalty and service men expect of wives, they gave, not singly to men, but collectively to one another". (95)

Another of Gilman's concern is religion. She believes that androcentric religions, particularly Christianity, focus on the past. This produces a society that is stagnant and hinders positive social advancement (Cannon and De La Rosa 2001). Gilman is confident that a women-oriented religion, if there were, would focus on this life and its future, not in the after-life or the past. This theory on religion is "tested" in *Herland*:

"Have you no respect for the past? For what was thought and believed by your foremothers?"

"Why, no," she said. "Why should we? They are all gone. They knew less than we do. If we are not beyond them, we are unworthy of them – and unworthy of the children who must go beyond us."

This set me to thinking in good earnest... these women, quite unassisted by any masculine spirit of enterprise, had ignored their past and built daringly for the future. (Gilman 1979: 111).

In addition, according to Gilman (1970) androcentric religions are obsessed with what is right and wrong. This is clearly portrayed in *Herland* through the conversation Vandyck has with Ellador:

“You have no theory of eternal punishment...?”

Ellador laughed... She was so sorry for me.

“How could we?” she asked, fairly enough. “We have no punishments in life, you see, so we don’t imagine them after death.”

“Have you *no* punishments? Neither for children nor criminals – such mild criminals as you have?” I urged.

“Do you punish a person for a broken leg or a fever? We have preventive measures, and cures...” (Gilman 1979: 112)

Although Vandyck further argues that there will be “Peace and Beauty and Comfort and Love, - with God” (117) in the eternal after-life for those who do not sin, Ellador insists that though Vandyck’s argument is well and good, she questions why the stress is solely on the after-life and not on this life. As a result of the focus of androcentric cultures on the past and the after-life as well as a conflict-oriented belief on right and wrong, Gilman believes that humanity can only achieve partial progress. She tries to show through *Herland* that a more woman-centred society will cure androcentric ills because women are more inclined towards the joy and comforts of life rather than conflict and power struggle. Furthermore she shows that because women are “social mothers”, they are also more inclined towards life rather than destruction.

RESISTING FEMALE ARCHETYPES

According to Demaris S. Wehr (1987), the focus of feminist approach is on how social forces determine social behaviour. In other words, feminism is interested in the fact that society has a powerful influence on how humans behave. Therefore, if a society is androcentric, then the men and women will have androcentric behaviours, tendencies and beliefs. Conversely, a Jungian explanation of social behaviour is more biological. Wehr (1987) illustrates this with Ann Ulanov’s Jungian justification regarding social behaviour:

If behaving in a “feminine” manner, for example, is biologically, genetically, and even ontologically determined, then certainly women who do not act that way are violating their own natures. This is what the Jungian view of the “feminine” and the “masculine” implies (13). However, Wehr argues that if the feminine and masculine is explored further, a certain degree of ambiguity is revealed as the two concepts are not strictly gender-specific. She says “each one represents a potential for development in each sex” (13). Wehr’s thesis parallels Gilman’s because both argue that many of human behaviours categorised as gender specific are actually more neutral than society would like to believe.

Gilman, for example, states that women are actually the archetypal worker. She says “[a]s a matter of fact industry is in its origin feminine; that is, maternal. It is the overflowing fountain of mother-love and mother-power which first prompts the human race to labor; and for long ages men performed no productive industry at all; being merely hunters and fighters” (1970). Though in androcentric culture men have become the economic creature, Gilman believes that women can bring a different set of values to industry – maintenance of peace, health, order, and morality - based on the experience of care and nourishment of children at home as Vandyck admits:

“As I learned more and more to appreciate what these women had accomplished, the less proud I was of what we, with all our manhood, had done”.

“You see, they had no wars. They had no kings, and no priests, and no aristocracies. They were sisters, and as they grew together, not by competition, but by united action”.
(Gilman 1979: 60)

It is the economic woman that Gilman tries to portray in *Herland*; women who are simultaneously industrious and motherly without any concerns with whether they are the archetypal feminine or not as observed by Vandyck in the novel:

“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 fulfilment of their great process” (Gilman 1979: 58-59).

Vandyck’s observations are contrasted with Terry’s frustration with the women in Herland: “It’s likely women - just a pack of women – would have hung together like that! We all know women can’t organize – they scrap like anything – are frightfully jealous” (58). He feels that the women of Herland are not real because “these women aren’t *womanly*” (58). What Gilman does is to encompass all the stereotype notions and expectations of the feminine – sensuous or objects of male pleasure, tending toward passivity and socially isolated within the domain of home; tending to be emotionally unstable and inclining towards being moody; and generally not having independence, power, and ability to control life’s challenges – in Terry’s character to provide an avenue for comparison to show the very androcentric nature of society.

“ ...Tell us – what is the work of the world, that men do – which we have not here?”

“Oh, everything,” Terry said grandly. “The men do everything, with us.” He squared his broad shoulders and lifted his chest. “We do not allow our women to work. Women are loved – idolized – honoured – kept in the home to care for the children.” (60-61)

In addition, Terry’s misplaced confidence seems more ridiculous when the entirety of what he takes for granted does not make any sense in Herland where the women’s role extends from childcare to construction of industries that mark the progress of this manless society.

CONCLUSION

Writing during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s Gilman is undeniably ahead of her time. Today, some of her utopian social visions regarding women have become a social reality for most societies. Gilman’s projection of daring animus images through the women of Herland provides alternatives to traditional androcentric roles and modes of thought. It also shows alternative images and ways of living for both men and women. She illustrates how women

have been forced into restrictive roles in society – staying at home, forbidden to be industrious or to pursue knowledge. Through the novel *Herland*, Gilman also shows the unnatural division of roles according to androcentric beliefs that the female is characteristically finer and weaker, thus needing masculine protection.

In summary, Gilman's novel, *Herland*, projects alternative societal models and possibilities for women, and men, in a changing society. As Lane states, "in her utopia, Charlotte Perkins Gilman transforms the private world of mother-child, isolated in the individual home, into a community of mothers and children in a socialized world... in the interest of us all (1979: xxvii). What this means is that Gilman expands the importance of the feminine such as motherhood and childcare from the domestic domain to a larger societal significance without falling into the simplistic opinion that only women are oppressed.

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Shahizah Ismail Hamdan & Ravichandran Vengadasamy
Pusat Pengajian Bahasa & Linguistik
Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
Email: sha@ukm.my