

## CULTURAL ECOFEMINISM IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S FEMINIST UTOPIAN VISION AND ITS LIMITATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an American feminist author of fiction and non-fiction, lecturer and sociologist of the late 19th, early 20th centuries. She integrates her sociological commentary into her ecofeminist vision for an alternative community consisting merely of women in her utopian fiction Herland published in 1915. The community she envisioned can best be read through the lens of cultural ecofeminism with her essentialist view of women's innate tendency to uphold the sanctity of the environment opting for a peaceful coexistence rather than patriarchal domination. Since men are considered to be impediments to such a coexistence, they are absent from the utopian vision based on sisterhood of all women where they breed through parthenogenesis and raise their daughters as a community rather than in individual family units. Familial relations are not entirely eliminated, rather, as all Herlanders descend from a common maternal ancestor, are biologically as well as culturally connected.*

**Keywords:** Cultural ecofeminism, utopian fiction, gender identity, Herland, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Herlanders' historical account of 2000 years, as related by the novel's male narrator, sociologist Vandyke Jennings begins with a succession of wars as a result of which most of their male population is decimated and they lose their access to the shore. This loss of access marked the initial involuntary boundary set up between Herland and the rest of the world. Their only mountain pass was destroyed as a result of a volcanic eruption and the only remaining population consisted of a few men, slaves and women. The volcanic eruption marked the secondary natural border that was drawn between Herlanders and their past. Slaves considered the disaster as an opportunity for an uprising and emancipation and killed off the men of the land along with old women. The "infuriated virgins" however, did not allow the slaves to take

over power and took up arms to defend themselves by slaying the slaves. Fear of slave revolts as well as miscegenation were deep seated causes of discomfort in the American consciousness as well as in the consciousness of other slaveholding and colonial powers, which are also reflected in the novel. Therefore, in Herland, women's resistance was not primarily against patriarchal domination or monarchy which the country was ruled under, but against male slaves who threatened the Aryan women with subordination and racial contamination. Gilman's controversial views on African-Americans and how to regulate their coexistence with white Americans so as to benefit the society were clearly expressed on her article published in 1908, "A Suggestion on the Negro Problem":

Let each sovereign state carefully organize in every county and township an enlisted body of negroes below a certain grade of citizenship. Those above it –the decent, self-supporting, progressive negroes- form no problem and call for nothing but congratulation. But the whole body of negroes who do not progress, who are not self-supporting, who are degenerating into an increasing percentage of social burdens and criminals, should be taken hold of by the state. (80-81).

The compulsory segregation of races presumably depending on their level of progression that Gilman proposes to eliminate socio-economic burdens on a superior civilization is reminiscent of how Herlanders dealt with their own criminals which was already a rare occurrence among them. Having no governmental or judicial system in place, Herlanders are surprisingly well organized, although they are tolerant of a limited amount of diversity in skills and professions, societal welfare is of utmost importance and the lines between rehabilitation and elimination of perceived threats to this progress remain obscure.

After their resistance to and extermination of slaves proved successful, women of Herland despaired and faced another fear: fear of extinction. Unlike others, this was one obstacle not possible to overcome with solidarity or cooperation among the remaining citizens. After five years of hard work and toil to make their land fertile and themselves self sufficient, a divine intervention relieved them of their fear. One woman, the over mother, became pregnant and gave birth to five daughters. All five of them, after the age of twenty five also bore five daughters and thus started a whole new race of women, the Herlanders. All related to each other through their over mother, motherhood and communal raising of the daughters became the central sanctity that their lives revolved around. The process of pregnancy and birth, although not described in minute detail by Gilman, is realized through a conscious willing of beings into existence by thought and concentration in a Biblical godlike manner. Just as women can will other women to existence by forethought, it is also possible for them to prevent themselves from getting pregnant by concentrating on physical labor and assistance in rearing other women's children as child rearing is a communal endeavor in Herland.

Efficiency, an adversary to wastefulness, moral and evolutionary progress, maternal feminism grounded on the idea that women had a privileged public role to play in the common fight against social decay were all parts of the moral ideological stance prevalent in the Progressive Era United States. The era was rampant with clashes of ideals and by no means consisted of a monolithic reformist movement. "Progressivism's social control was premised upon a view that society should be planned in the name of a social collective, where the collective had interests greater than the sum of the interests of its individual members" (Leonard 2009: 117). When the collective interests of the nation, emphasis on greater efficiency, domestic language of motherhood, and the presumed superiority of one race over others merged, it resulted in an argument in favor of eugenics and euthenics at the same time. Breeding with eugenic aims in mind required the parents to ensure their children had good genes. Eugenic feminism pushed for social, political, economic and sexual gender equality so that women could make independent decisions for marriage and reproduction to ensure racial purity and

improvement. The fact that purity and improvement stood in opposition to each other did not prevent eugenic feminism from being integrated into other social reform movements in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eugenic feminism called for negative eugenics, through weeding out of the defects in the society by refusing them the grounds to multiply. Gilman believed as she argued in her *Women and Economics* that women's specialization in professions and gaining of economic independence would help them eliminate the sex distinction they are assigned and make conscious decisions about choosing a reproductive mate and become better mothers.

Strong, free, active women, the sturdy, field-working peasant, the burdenbearing savage, are no less good mothers for their human strength. But our civilized 'feminine delicacy,' which appears somewhat less delicate when recognized as an expression of sexuality in excess, –makes us no better mothers, but worse. The relative weakness of women is a sex distinction. It is apparent in her to a degree that injures motherhood, that injures wifehood, that injures the individual. ... In every way the over-sexed condition of the human female reacts unfavorably upon herself, her husband, her children, and the race (1898: 46).

These are exactly the theories she realizes in her eutopia. Eutopia, as opposed to utopia, etymologically meaning "a good place" is attainable in the here and now. Aside from the supernatural intervention that enables parthenogenesis, the narrative reads like a eutopia through a social transformation that was initially enforced by naturally and artificially drawn boundaries and later through the removal of the barriers between public and private domains whereby the educational system in place becomes ingrained in life itself. Daughters of Herlanders are educated in life skills in their everyday lives without being aware that they are receiving a systematic education and later on specialize according to their particular talents and become foresters, gardeners, gatherers, teachers or experts in raising children. In contrast to the American woman, a Herlander is self-sufficient and in control of her environment as well as her progeny. "Reproduction becomes a civilized system of beliefs that works for the benefit of civilization: an organized reproductive technology, an efficient industry that eliminates waste" (Hudak 2003: 470). There are indeed women in Herland, whom the majority might decide to refuse motherhood because they decide the women would become unfit mothers. From an evolutionary perspective, since Herlanders are presented as more advanced compared to the rest of the Western civilization, some of those "lowest types" are already sterile, therefore naturally are weeded out. Education, to Gilman, should only be entrusted to experts, and maternity is strictly separated from child rearing. This results in an authoritarian negative eugenics rather than a voluntary, liberal one. "Her vision of a feminist eugenics placed women as scientific experts in charge of engineering society's evolutionary progress, separated breeding from motherhood, and scrutinized the dysgenic behaviors and qualities of men" (Rensing 2013: 102).

Euthenics on the other hand called for improved human efficiency via modification of the environmental health conditions of the society and feeds into the same control mechanism regnant in the community. The main reason for the emergence of the two principles of action was the fear of what is called "race suicide" at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to the widespread anxiety of race degeneration through miscegenation, race suicide referred to the declining birth rates in the Western world and how the foreign population replaced that of the natives in the United States (Ward 1913: 751). Natives here ironically denoted while Anglo Saxons rather than the indigenous population of the continent. Even in the civilized world, according to Ward, to whom Gilman was indebted for the theoretical background of her novel, the working classes reproduced more than was permissible in organic law, and the intellectual classes valued quality over quantity and refrained from reproducing multiple children (752). Gilman believed that fit women had the moral duty to produce more than one child in order to

prevent race suicide just as she believed in Herland, unfit mothers should forego their opportunity to do so, even when it was biologically possible (Ziegler 2008: 227). Both eugenics and eugenics in these regards were primarily concerned with population control both in terms of regulating limitations on it and raising the quality of life of the existing population. Improving of the living conditions of the population inevitably was dependent on its limitation. By initially studying the effects of the environment on people, eugenics aims to regulate education, nutrition and sanitation in order to bring out the best possible result for the race.

The idea that education should be turned over to experts is an idea that was very closely tied to the ideals of the Progressive movement. Progressive thought was also intensely interested in public health and hygiene. As a result of urban sewer systems installed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, death from communicable disease was finally brought under control. That success encouraged Progressive reformers to believe that other aspects of society could be managed with scientific principles (Bowers 2018: 1316).

Ellen S. Richards, a pioneer of sanitary engineering would prioritize eugenics over eugenics in 1910 by emphasizing the former's ability to produce hygiene and a better environment for the present generation and an immediate opportunity for action. As the health of the members of the community relies on food, clean air, and clean water, through education all members should become aware that social welfare surpasses that of and at the same time is complementary with individual needs (Richards: 1912). They have also managed to phase out diseases through sanitation and are in no need of medical profession, as pollution in all forms was believed to be the cause of various medical conditions in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Progressive Era United States. "The resemblance of Herland to a well-ordered, extraordinarily clean, extraordinarily picturesque country town signals a nostalgia for a rather dehistoricized version of the American past" (Peysen 1992: 13). After all, one of the main culprits of pollution and moral degeneration as well as decline in health conditions was considered to be industrialization and a break from rural economy.

...a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden... We could look out on one side over a stretch of open country, quietly rich and lovely; on the other, the garden, with tables here and there, far apart enough for privacy. Let me say right here that with all their careful 'balance of population' there was no crowding in this country. There was room, space, a sunny breezy freedom everywhere (Gilman 2009: 13).

## 2. OVERPOPULATION AND CHILDREN

Coming to terms with the fact that overpopulation would lead to scarcity of resources, the conscious creators of women also maintained control over parthenogenesis in order not to cause any decrease in quality of life regarding the existing residents of Herland. As competition was utterly unheard of among the holy sisterhood, they made individual sacrifices by determining the limits of the growth on population appropriate for sustainability and stopped themselves from having children until they reached the ideal number of people. They compensated for lack of what they deemed sacred by taking care of each other's children whom they called "OUR children" and refrained from any claims to individual ownership of them. What Gilman prescribed in Herland, was the population theory an English clerk and scholar, Thomas Robert Malthus proposed in 1798 in his work, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Malthus believed that unless externally regulated, exponentially growing human population would lead to starvation and consequently wars. He postulated first that food is necessary to the existence of men as well as passion between the sexes and it is unlikely that these propositions will change in the near future (1807: 4). Men eat and men multiply. However, the ratio of the two determine his quality of life. Among plants and animals, reproduction is not an issue to be

questioned beforehand. Whereas with people, it is possible to evaluate whether one would be able to provide adequately for its offspring before bringing them into the world. Then the dictate of nature for men, albeit just as imperative, can be postponed or refused indefinitely.

The food therefore which before supported seven millions must now be divided among seven millions and a half or eight millions. The poor consequently must live much worse, and many of them be reduced to severe distress. The number of labourers also being above the proportion of the work in the market, the price of labour must tend toward a decrease, while the price of provisions would at the same time tend to rise (9).

The way Herlanders tackle the issue of overpopulation is manifold. The initial solution is the management of space. They have eliminated the presence of most animals from their land because of the scarcity of soil to work with. They simply took up too much space and the space used for animals could be used to feed Herlanders (Gilman 2009: 49). They do have cats, the males of whom they find utterly useless. They have bred cats through artificial selection for them to no longer kill birds or meow and become very attached to people, but they still destroy mice and moles. Since the narrators' questioning of Herlanders regarding animals does not lead to a concrete reply, the way animals were destroyed so as to save space for agriculture is left ambiguous. But since they were, Herlanders have not made use of animals as food, means of transportation or clothing. They are amused by the idea that American women wear feather on their hats and horrified to hear cows are milked and killed for human consumption.

'Whatever do you do without milk?' Terry demanded incredulously.

'MILK? We have milk in abundance—our own.'

'But—but—I mean for cooking—for grown people,' Terry blundered, while they looked amazed and a shade displeased.

... 'We keep cattle for their milk, as well as for their meat,' he explained. 'Cow's milk is a staple article of diet. There is a great milk industry—to collect and distribute it.'

...

'Has the cow no child?' asked Somel earnestly.

'Oh, yes, of course, a calf, that is.'

'Is there milk for the calf and you, too?'

It took some time to make clear to those three sweet-faced women the process which robs the cow of her calf, and the calf of its true food; and the talk led us into a further discussion of the meat business. (49-50).

Although the conversation between the American men and their Herlander guides point to a sensitivity towards exploitation of the female cow and her calf, this is the only instance in the novel where their veganism is grounded on an ethical consideration. Human-non human hierarchy, exploitation of the female and motherhood so sacred to Herlanders, its implications for and similarity to gender inequality in the rest of the world is not articulated further by Gilman. Disappearance of cattle, feeding on fruits, nuts, berries and grains all year round stems from the same concern Malthus expressed in his work on population. "The author who invents a utopian space invokes a creation myth in which he or she becomes progenitor, preserver, and potentially destroyer of a new world (Peyser 1992: 284). This is one of what Malthus called a preventive check on population that Herlanders applied. The second one was making individual sacrifices for the greater good of the land. When they decided on the optimal number of people that the society can sustain, they refused to reproduce and invested their maternal energy to the betterment of the community by suppressing their instincts and foregoing individual

motherhood. For Malthus, there are two types of checks on population. The first one preventive checks which are applied by men. This check presupposes a foresight in men which would enable him to measure the consequences of his actions and prevent the distress his reproduction would cause to himself, his family or the unborn child. Positive checks on the other hand are applied by nature or are consequential to the already existing population and lower classes are more prone to it (1807: 23). Mortality among young children due to malnutrition or disease, famine, pestilence and wars all are positive checks on population which derive from and lead to misery and decimation.

Social Darwinism is an inconceivable notion because there is no conception of the economically unfit. That the poor classes in the United States reproduce in greater numbers than the wealthy sounds irrational and inefficient to them. As the men are forced to compare the socio-economic struggles in the United States with the peaceful and wealthy existence in Herland, the visitors gradually begin to have less plausible reasons to have a sense of national pride. The narrator cannot help but conclude that the American form of patriotism when disengaged from a concern for social welfare is destined to be a self-centered notion with no meliorative function. "Patriotism is largely pride, and very largely combativeness. Patriotism generally has a chip on its shoulder" (Gilman 2009: 95). Despite their respectful engagement with the American men, genuine curiosity for cultures outside of theirs, gentle questioning of the values and norms, the men are until a certain point in the narrative when they consent to stay in Herland, are virtually prisoners. During their imprisonment, they are educated just like Herlander children are educated and as a result of this process of indoctrination, they are expected to convert into what is presented as a higher civilization. One of the men, Terry, who is depicted as a impetuous womanizer, with fantasies of turning the land into his personal Harem and becoming the king of Herland fails to be converted and after his attempted rape of his wife Alima, banished from Herland. "This is the enthusiasm of the imperialist and the feminist. The Herlanders are excited at the prospect of the 'new blood' their male explorers represent, but only so far as they can be entirely incorporated, without waste" (Carter-Sanborn 2000: 29). The efficiency with which the land is governed, also extends to the Herlanders' attitude towards incorporation of outsiders into their community. "...evolution of the male is not a 'mistake' but a successful adaptation, nurtured through its early stages by the sexuo-economic relation but now in need of a new direction in order to be a continuing success. The men are welcome in Herland because it is for just such an intervention that the women have been preparing" (Shaw 2000: 33). After all, the incorporation is not vital for the women's continuing existence, they can compensate for any function they would be expected to lack, the ones attributed solely to men. Theirs is presented as an altruistic quest, to spread their eutopia to the rest of the world, beginning with the three outsiders, a benevolent form of cultural imperialism.

### **3. CULTURAL ECOFEMINISM**

Cultural ecofeminism calls for the liberation of nature as well as women, by initially bringing to forefront the essential qualities of women which have been devalued by patriarchal construction of gender identities "such as intuition, care, nurture, emotions, and the body, for example, that have been associated culturally and historically with women" (Carlassare 2000: 93). Since women are believed to be in a more intimate relationship with nature, it runs the risk of reinforcing the very discrimination feminism opposes. The epistemological distinction drawn between gender identities by assigning them innate characteristics is considered essentialist and this has been the main point of criticism directed towards cultural ecofeminism. Ecofeminists "had advanced critiques of the Mother Earth metaphor (popular among...advocates of goddess spirituality and cultural ecofeminism) for its gender essentialism and homogenization of ecological, cultural, and species differences" (Gaard 2011: 39). The question remains whether

or not the adoption of assigned female qualities can indeed overturn the subjugation of both nature and women. As ecofeminism rejects the hierarchical dualisms inherent to patriarchal constructions, and presumed binary oppositions such as self/other, man/woman and culture/nature, the egalitarian environment envisioned by ecofeminists would deem those dualisms as obsolete.

Cultural ecofeminists resist patriarchal language, religion, and culture for the sake of planetary survival and the empowerment of women. Whether they recreate goddess based spiritualities, invent new myths, or new linguistic or discursive styles, they do so in an effort to bring about an ecological and egalitarian transformation of culture and human consciousness (Carlassare 2000, 95).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Herlanders speak their own language, have their own creation myth, believe in a form of maternal pantheism and a mother goddess; their religion changed as they evolved through time by removing deities of war and plunder and they possess a deep attachment to Mother Earth, the root of their livelihood. All they have achieved in their quest for peaceful coexistence, they have achieved through privileging nature bound qualities of the female sex. The ultimate purpose for their existence is motherhood and even after they marry the American visitors, they refrain from engaging in sexual intercourse for pleasure unless there is a possibility it might result in a pregnancy. Gilman at this point assigns sexual pleasure merely to men and “in her attempt to strip the female body of the signs and marks placed on it by the male gaze...robs the women of sexual agency” (Balic 2005, 112) and also “advances the longheld belief that women lack sexual desires...Thus, she fails to invert...the hegemonic views of women as mothers or virgins rather than as individuals with sexual needs and desires” (Bowers 2018, 1320). Sex, not followed by reproduction is a waste, and it traverses with their emphasis on efficiency.

In more ways than one, Gilman's *Herland* gradually is transformed into a dystopic setting for the contemporary reader. Her gender constructs are essentialist; she reinforces many stereotypes and dualisms critiqued in the first wave feminist rhetoric of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, her political vision is imperialist and hierarchy legitimizing discourses racist and ethnocentric; her cultural ecofeminist perspective is prone to the same criticisms contemporary cultural ecofeminism is; even the veganism she presents is disjoined from ethical considerations for animals. She still successfully applies all of the theoretical considerations she argued for in her sociological non-fiction inspired by Progressive Era social movements, evolutionary theory, socialism, and gender equality. She integrates controversial policies of population control through preventive checks, eugenics and euthenics into her eutopian vision of an altruistic community of women.

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