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SUBJUGATION AND AUTONOMY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE REPRODUCTIVE POLITICS IN *HERLAND* AND *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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Abstract:

*This paper seeks to explore how reproductive politics is framed in the utopian work of Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). While both texts center on the oversight and regulation of female bodies, they present contrasting visions of how reproduction can be used either as a tool of empowerment or oppression. Using feminist analysis it seeks to address the state sponsored oppression of women in dystopian and seemingly utopian societies, manifestations of which can be found in the contemporary world. In *Herland*, reproduction in an all-female society is made possible by parthenogenesis, where the process of biological reproduction is not exploited for power but serves as a means of social harmony. In contrast, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a dystopian future in which women's reproductive capacities are commodified and controlled by a theocratic regime, thus reflecting the dangers of patriarchal dominance over female bodies. By comparing these two works, this study examines how reproductive politics intersect with issues of autonomy, gender power structures, and societal control, offering critical insights into the broader implications of reproductive rights and freedoms in both historical and contemporary contexts.*

Keywords: *Commodification, Reproductive Politics, Patriarchal Dominance, Oppression, Control, etc.*

Introduction:

Reproductive rights have been at the center of discourse in academic studies, where many scholarships provide an insight into this issue. With the recent US Supreme Court judgment to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the issue of reproductive politics has come to the forefront again, which is on the rise in various states across the globe. This issue has been explored in the two fictional societies of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Herland*, which have explored or rather, speculated about women's rights in a dystopia and a utopia. Traditionally, dystopias have been written from a masculine point of view, with women being secondary marginal characters, however, in these two novels, women are at the core of the narrative, thus giving us an opportunity to evaluate from a feminist lens or what Elaine Showalter terms as gynocriticism. The above mentioned works also echo the real world politics rather than being just cautionary tales and pose a serious question about the status and rights of women in the modern world.

Ecriture Feminine: Reading *Herland* and *The Handmaid's Tale*:



The primary reason behind choosing these works is their female authorship, and how they have tried to capture the unique experiences of women and give a feminist voice to the narrative. Helene Cixous, a French feminist theorist and writer, introduced the concept of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) in her work *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975). In her theory, she tries to promote a type of writing that challenges traditional, patriarchal structures of language and expression. Cixous was a firm believer that women should write in a way that reflects their unique bodily experiences, emotions, and consciousness—breaking free from the rational, linear, and hierarchical forms of male-dominated writing. She also talks about how women can reclaim their voices through writings, thus regaining power over their bodies as well as identities. When we apply *écriture féminine* to *Herland* and *The Handmaid's Tale*—two texts that have been written on the female experience—their bodies and societal roles, which challenge the patriarchal modes of expression, it clearly corroborates Cixous' theory.

Dystopia and Utopia: Female Agency and Resistance:

In literary works science fiction contains two subgenres of dystopia and utopia, both of which try to analyze fictional societies, which can either be a gloomy nightmare, or a perfect paradise to live in. However one must note that even in a perfect utopia, traces of asymmetry can be seen, where the impeccable order leads to the society becoming static and this state of equilibrium pushes it into being stagnant, which is the case in *Herland* as we notice through their practice of negative eugenics, when they try to 'breed out' the 'lowest types'. We can map the differences between these two genres have blurred over time.

The tradition of dystopian fiction can be traced back to Thomas More's *Utopia* and the genre continues to remain popular and relevant as it resonates with the anxieties of people, about the rise of fascist forces, despotism, strengthened right wing orthodox politics, the mingling of religion in state affairs, extremism, social injustices etc. "Dystopian literature is especially attuned to how historically-conditioned social forces shape the inner life and personal experience of the individual, and how acts of individuals can, in turn, shape the social structures in which they are situated" (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione).

Atwood has followed in the footsteps of More and Orwell, in writing *The Handmaid's Tale*—a speculative fiction, as it imagines a future which can easily morph into reality if we do not practice caution in checking the growing abuse of power by state. In other words she says, "Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen." It depicts a dystopian society of Gilead which is reproductively challenged as elite women were rendered infertile due to the environmental toxins whereas 'The Handmaids' are forced to conceive children of military commanders. Michel Foucault in his work, *The history of Sexuality* says, "To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounces itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification. Power constrains sex only through a taboo that plays on the alternative between two nonexistences" (Foucault and Hurley).

Atwood has employed the use of political power to control the lives of citizens of Gilead who try to navigate their way in a distorted version of reality. The narrative focuses on



one such character, Offred who is forced to be a handmaid and it is through her story the horrors of this futuristic regime are unveiled. The intricacy of the female experience in a dystopian world is exhibited through her character. "Atwood's novel, in which the protagonist is subjected to depersonalizing, utilitarian sex as a kind of stand-in for her master's infertile wife, her sexuality commodified not for pleasure but for reproduction" (Casibual Jr, 128).

Gilman is one of the earliest female voices in the genre of Science fiction, particularly feminist utopias. She has imagined a society where no man has existed for thousands of years there are no traces of patriarchy and women have developed an ability to reproduce through Parthogenesis because of a mutation. Three men named Terry, Jeff and Van discover this society and are taken prisoners and learn the ways of the Herlanders and study *them* from an anthropological and sociological perspective, whilst they marry three herlanders, namely: Celis, Alima and Ellador so as to assimilate and learn more about this land. It is through their marriages the author illustrates three types of male-female relationships. Her primary purpose was to explore men's development as the novel progresses.

The Female Body: A Site of Conflict:

As per Michel Foucault 'Biopolitics', refers to the state's control over bodies in particular relation to sexuality, reproduction and health which are conducive to the broader political and economic objectives of the government. In both the worlds created by Gilman and Atwood, we see manifestations of the Foucauldian concept of Biopower and Biopolitics.

Herland is a society where only females exist and have complete autonomy over their own bodies, and reproduction is autonomously done by parthenogenesis where the involvement of a male partner is not needed anymore. Since they have limited land, they try to control the population by following 'negative eugenics', The female body was a site of conflict, the women in the country were "willing to 'lay down our lives' for our country, but they had to forego motherhood for their country- and it was precisely the hardest thing for them to do" (102). Some women were deprived the joys of motherhood, and it was only given to certain section of the society, where it was peacefully decided that "This is all the people we will make"

Motherhood had a different connotation in the society of Herland, it was not an emotional experience but "a highly specialized craft". The mother who bears the child was not always responsible for nurturing, but "The care of babies involves education and is entrusted only to the most fit," (118). Even in a utopian society, consisting only of women, the control over women's bodies and their reproductive rights seem to be a common characteristic, which highlights my belief that all utopias are dystopias in disguise. The defining feature of the Republic of Gilead is coerced reproduction via the means of social hierarchy over women: The handmaids. Even the Marthas and the housewives do not possess any bodily autonomy. They are merely a tool in the hands of state to perpetuate their progeny, and if the Handmaid's cannot procreate they are "shipped off to the Colonies, with the Unwomen." In contrast to Herland where motherhood is a communal activity, involving participation of all women, the female body here has been dehumanized and completely commoditized, and the identity of women have been stripped away, even their real names cease to exist and they are referred to by the names of their commander, for e.g. 'Ofglenn' or 'Offred'.



The female body is seen as a source of power in Herland; the women form a 'literal sisterhood' and are focused on the growth of community thus empowering each other and forming a deeply peaceful and egalitarian society. In contrast to this, the female body is a site of oppression and state control in Gilead, which is symbolic of the prevalent patriarchal norms. The women are meek creatures devoid of a voice and an identity, as the narrator describes: "I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource" (71).

Un/Doing Gender Roles:

Judith Butler in her book, *Gender Trouble* states that "[w]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler, 33). Gender is merely an act to be performed which is dictated by the language, social expectations and prevailing norms. These gender norms are constantly defied by the women of Herland as they reaffirm Butler's position; gender is not real but merely an act, a performance. When the men disappeared from society two thousand years ago, the women assumed the roles traditionally reserved for males, like constructing infrastructure, taking care of the cattle etc. Also "the tradition of men as guardians and protectors had quite died out. These stalwart virgins had no men to fear and therefore no need of protection" (89). The traditional expectations of the society are echoed in the words of Terry, one of the men who is taken as prisoner by them when he says that "these women aren't womanly" because they lacked 'feminine charms'. The prosperous and peaceful society of Herland depicts that gender is merely performative, and when one sheds this façade, an egalitarian order can be established. This can be compared to how the women in Gilead are expected to perform certain roles which are also manifested in the colors they are instructed to wear; Handmaids are dressed in red colored gowns with a red umbrella, the Martha's dress is 'dull green' color, this stratification is a constant reminder of their position and role in society. The division based on color also discourages them from fraternizing with each other.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* says, "One is not born a woman, rather becomes a woman" This sheds light on the idea that gender is socially constructed, which is reflected in the women of Gilead, who, owing to their gender are restricted to the traditional roles of child bearing and rearing. They have no identity of their own, except for being a fertile woman, as is reiterated by Offred in the following lines: "I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have trouble remembering what I used to look like. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance" (149).

Mothers are of supreme importance in the work of Gilman "The Herland system of reproduction challenged the idea of presenting and packaging women as mothers. It emphasizes womanhood as a social construct rather than a biological one" (Casibual Jr, 125). Through this society it is evident that the idea of being a woman varies in spaces and times and is merely a social construct.

Motherhood and Autonomy: Idealized and Coerced Reproductive Roles:

There is a notion of 'Human motherhood' in Herland, where "The children in this country are the one center and focus of all our thoughts. Every step of our advance is always considered in



its effects on them- on the race. You see, we are mothers.” Motherhood is a communal activity which entails social support from all women, thus fostering a nurturing environment for the children. However, this depiction of motherhood is too idealized in comparison to the real world, as every mother considers her child as her own, and will not choose to sever her ties with the child for the greater good of society, whereas in Herland, “the element of personal pride seemed strangely lacking” and thus there are no surnames or family names. The autonomy and freedom which the Herlanders possess has led to the creation of a peaceful society bound by love and sisterhood.

However, the coerced reproductive role forced on the female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* has changed the nature of motherhood, from being a stage of utmost happiness to being a tool for survival. Atwood has poignantly described the loss of motherhood from Offred when her daughter of eight years is isolated leaving the mother clueless about her daughter's whereabouts. In order to cope with this trauma and “To endure the barbarities incurred by the Gileadean system, Offred should neglect the memory of her little girl” (Patowary). Offred sees ghost of her own mother and is constantly worried if she's alive or not, only to later find out that she is dead. Thus motherhood has been described as a burden, a task, a boon and a bane all at the same time.

Implications on Modern Reproductive Politics:

Both *Herland* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are cautionary stories which provide strong critiques of reproductive politics, written at different time periods, and in different contexts, these are still powerful texts that remain relevant in the contemporary debates regarding women's bodily autonomy, reproductive rights. They have helped in understanding how the social, political and cultural discourses have shaped the debates around women's bodies.

In Herland, women's asexual reproduction has freed them from patriarchal dependence. To contextualize this in the real world, it implies that we need to empower women to make free decisions about their own bodies. It is a pro-choice stance, right to access to abortion, reproductive healthcare, to safe methods of contraceptives and reduce state's control in the personal affairs of citizens. Thus the story inspires a message about freeing the women from the burden of tremendous cultural, social, religious and psychological pressures allowing them to make an unbiased choice. Biopower and biopolitics are extensively used by the state, which hampers the basic fundamental rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 including but not limited to: right to freedom, right to privacy and right to equality.

The Handmaid's Tale, on the other hand offers a chilling assessment of reproductive politics and how it can be used as a tool to oppress women. What seems like a mere fiction is a reality in many modern countries. As per UN DESA report, “Chile, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Holy See, Malta and Nicaragua did not permit abortion under any circumstances” (UNDESA). This novel not only tries to foretell a grim future but is an accurate description of some of the most backward countries in today's time live in this gruesome reality.

In Gilead, women are valued only for their ability to reproduce, turning their bodies into commodities to be controlled and exploited. This has manifested in the form of 'rental



wombs' or commercial surrogacy, where the rich and elites are using the poor for their own benefit, a phenomenon widely popular in third world countries.

Conclusion:

To conclude, dramatizing the interrelationship between power, sex and reproduction, the two narratives uphold the woman's perspective. Here, feminist analysis reveals stark differences between the two societies in terms of gender and social roles, motherhood and bodily autonomy as discussed in the paper. Both the novels are important critiques of reproductive politics that resonate in contemporary debates about women's reproductive rights and state control. However, it must be noted that the Gilman's Utopia is mere speculative and not a viable solution, as it is empirically impossible. It is often criticized as being "limited incomplete, inhuman, static" (Keyser, 40-45). *The Handmaid's Tale* is a warning against the theocratic and dictatorial regimes yet it does not fully capture the essence of oppression, as it "allow the white middle class heteronormative woman at the center of the plot to become at once a victim and a savior." (Ellen) Thus the two works, however flawed, offer a vantage point to study about women in dystopian literature and highlight the ongoing struggle for reproductive justice and the critical importance of protecting women's rights in the face of political and institutional challenges.

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