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To what extent does Charlotte P. Gilman contradict the socialist and feminist ideologies in her novels Herland and With Her in Our Land?

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Abstract

This essay examines the question "To what extent does Charlotte P. Gilman contradict the socialist and feminist ideologies in her novels Herland and With Her in Our Land?" In the beginning of the essay a short introduction of the novels are made. The essay continues with an examination of feminism and socialism in the novel Herland and then moves on to explore the same topics in the prequel novel, With Her In Ourland and discusses the points in the novels that failed or succeeded the ideologies. By the end of the essay, the conclusion is reached that while these novels both have traces of both ideologies engraved in them, they lack the grounded and equalist approach that is needed.

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I. Introduction

Herland is a utopian novel where a peaceful civilized country of only women is depicted. Three men hear tales about the country and decide to see if the rumours are true. The men are; Vandyck Jennings, a socialist who is the voice of reason and the neutralizer in the group, Terry Nicholson who is a rich ladies man convinced that 'women like to be mastered' and Jeff Margrave, a botanist and a romantic gentleman who has an unrealistic angelic view on women and wants to take care of them rather than seeing them as equals. In the sequel novel With Her In Our Land, Ellador-a Herlandian- and Van go exploring the rest of the world and Ellador comes up with solutions to fix the flaws of the male dominated world.

With Her In Our Land, the sequel novel describing the events after Ellador with her husband Van leaves Herland, is set in the patriarchal world, mostly in the men's homeland United States during the World War I. The novel is based on Ellador's opinions on the world which is overruled by war, diseases, poverty and sham which are nonexistent concepts in Herland. She volunteers to see the rest of the world and prepare a report for Herland to decide whether the rest of the world is fit for their society to open up to or not.

II. Herland

Prior to their arrival in Herland and for a while into their stay, the three men are convinced that there must be men in Herland because they see civilisation and without men, to them, that should be impossible. Terry being the extreme representation of society enforced masculinity in the novel, insists that "They (women) would fight amongst themselves. Women always do. We mustn't look to find any sort of order and organization."(Gilman, 10). Even Van who is the voice of reason and Gilman's

representative as a neutral socialist in the novel agrees that a civilised country has to have men. However Herland is described as a perfect example of socialism in practice without any men to rule. The lack of men in Gilman's perfectly constructed utopia, however, fails to serve the purpose of enforcing gender equality. As Gilman describes a perfect society where there are no men, there is no way for this construction to be applied to the real world. It also implies that for women to rule, the men must be absent.

II.a. Feminism

When the men meet the women of Herland they are confused because of the contrast between their understanding of a woman and the Herlanders. At first they assume that the Herlanders despite not looking very feminine, are women thus can't be strong and independent. Terry is very set on his belief of what a woman is and what a woman should like so has brought necklaces, "traps" as he calls it, to allure the women. He implies that women think simple enough to be fooled by a shiny object. But Alima manages to grab the necklace from him and run away. "Her interest was more that of an intent boy playing a fascinating game than of a girl lured by an ornament"(Gilman,20). Terry also says that "women like to be run after"(Gilman,21) and later on in the novel attempts to rape Alima as he believes it is his marriegal right which results in him being expelled from Herland.

The men fantasize about the country as if it was a personal harem and they don't take it seriously. They also assume that all the women will be young in Herland. "We had always unconsciously assumed that whatever else they might be, would be young...'Woman' in the abstract is young and we assume charming"(Gilman,17). This connection the men have subconsciously made between femininity and youth causes them to seek for the 'real' women continuously. Terry especially despite having been

spending time around a bunch of women still doesn't consider them real women, not only because they are not weak and natty as he expected but also because they are not young; "A less feminine lot I never saw. A child a piece doesn't seem enough to develop what I call motherliness"(Gilman, 62).Terry accuses a society of women whose main religion is "motherhood" of not being motherly .In his mind motherhood is in correlation to the number of children a woman has and the picture he has of a mother is a woman with a baby in her hands completely absorbed in the child. Since in the men's society, 'children' implies sex, the understanding is, the more children the more fertility and therefore more femininity. In other words, femininity in the men's world lives to serve the masculine values. Van, Gilman's voice in the novel, understands this; "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, 50).

In Herland, there is no concept of gender. Herland is a homosexual society and the way of reproduction is pathogenesis. These women haven't had any men in the society for around two thousand years and have no concept of masculinity thus also none of femininity. They see themselves not as 'women' but rather as human. They treat the three men just like one of them, like human, instead of 'men'. "They treat us – well -- just as they do one another. It's as if our being men was a minor incident" (Gilman, 30). They do this despite comprehending the differences between males and females and being informed about the existence of different genders.

The clothes are a reflection of the lack of gender roles, too. All the women wear similar clothes which have been designed for comfort and practicality and when the men are held captive, they are given the same clothing options. This is one of the points that the socialist values in the novel can be seen. Gilman creates a society where everyone dresses the same and dresses for their jobs. The women's hairs are also all short. This challenges the men at first. They believe that a woman's hair must be long, as to them it is a symbol of sex appeal. Even Jeff, the most facile one out of the three, says "If their hair was only long, they would look so much more feminine."(Gilman,39).Terry however, is the most bothered by this. "Terry, with his clear practical theories decided that there were two kinds of women; those he wanted and those he didn't. Desirable and undesirable was his demarcation. The latter was a large class, but negligible. He never thought about them at all."(Gilman, 18). This hairstyle that Gilman chose for the women can be interpreted as a feminist statement. However, it can also be argued that this takes away the women's right to choose what they want to look like. This can imply that for women to be powerful, they have to abandon feminine values. Some women choose to look feminine for other reasons than to pleasure others and that is not to say that they don't desire to be powerful individuals. This message does not support the idea of gender equality and so contradicts what the writer is trying to pinpoint.

The writer is saying that if sexuality is abandoned, people would be able to focus on more important things and innovate the society instead. However, this also doesn't quite sit well with the feminist theory. It implies that for the women to be equal and the society to be ideal, women need to forgo their sexuality. And yet the men want to groom their hair to keep their appearance pleasing and are left to do so. If the men are able to be potent despite having values of aesthetic, then the women should be allowed to do the same and still be powerful.

The women, however, still maintain some qualities that are traditionally considered feminine and the writer plays them in a way that will benefit their society. These women are patient, calm and hold the loving and protective qualities associated with mothers. "We had expected pettiness, and found social consciousness...we had expected jealousy, and found a broad sisterly affection...we had expected hysteria, and found a standard of health and vigor"(Gilman, 91). This is the way Van describes how his expectations compare. The patience and tolerance that these women possess when applied to politics have succeeded. Gilman is stating that the motherly features that are normally considered as weak can be a strength in society.

The lack of sexual drive in the novel is conspicuous. Gilman explains that these women have evolved to be stripped of all sexual attractions. To them sex is for pleasure solely and therefore not necessary. The love they feel for the three men are also without any sexual desire. While this is something extreme that would not work for the real world, in this instance can be reasonable. The writer aims to liberate the women of the sexual responsibilities they have in a patriarchal society and giving them the time and energy to focus on more important things like how to improve their society. However, Gilman completely forgoes the possibility of homosexual attractions that would have normally been expected in a society of women. The writer denies these women the right to love just as she denies them the right to be feminine. This insinuates that women cannot be successful in life and love both and have to sacrifice sexual pleasure and romantic companionship if desiring to be strong. This again, is a contradiction to the gender equality and the feminist ideas Gilman is trying to support.

II.b. Socialism

The ability to have children is peculiar to women and women only and the writer chooses this unique ability to build her utopia upon. The Herlandians describe themselves as a nation of mothers. The imagery set in the book is also of a motherly nature; green, well-kept cities, designed especially for children to be safe and with every tree being modified to bear fruit. "By motherhood they were born and by motherhood they lived-- life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood." (Gilman, 57). This is the base of their religion as well. The country is so focused on motherhood that even the children are believed to belong to everyone. There are over-mothers whose job is to educate and raise the children. After birth the child's care is left to these over-mothers. This is considered the most prestigious career in the country. "Conscious Makers of People" (Gilman, 70) is how Van describes them. The literature's and all games' sole purpose is educating the children. Everything in the country is devoted to the children, which is what a mother in a patriarchal society would be expected to do essentially. This whole set up is reminiscent of a socialist approach. All the children get the same education and everyone serves one single purpose without complaints to benefit the country. This, however, kills individuality and despite the women stating that the education is built upon encouraging creative thinking, in a society where all people have the same lifestyle and the same purpose, it would be far to assume individuality exists.

A contradiction to the socialist and equalist ideologies Gilman is defending is the racist comments in the novel. Gilman is defending the existence of a superior race. All the women are of white skin, functional minds and athletic bodies, "pure-stock (Gilman, 123) as Van describes it. To make this possible, these women deem the 'bad' girls unfit to have children. However, Gilman ignores that everyone can make mistakes and these women too, are all ultimately human. The approach that these women have against

'bad' girls may be seen as contradictory to the motherly nature they are depicted to have, too. It is also conspicuous that there is no ethnical diversity.

Another point that fails the feminist purpose of the novel is the lack of depiction on the social interactions of the women. The novel is focused more on the way the country functions than it is in the role the women play in it and the way they play it. Even the main female characters (Ellador, Altima, Ceils, Somel) are left underexplored if not unexplored. There is no example given that can be set for the real world.

III. With Her In Our Land

In the follow up novel *With Her In Our Land*, the author uses Ellador to question other characters and in this way she underlines the injustices of the men's world. Ellador, when faced with a completely different side of the world, tries to learn and understand by questioning. Instead of accusing the person she is faced with, she asks naive questions and leaves the person questioning themselves instead.

She often ends up ridiculing the problems by pointing out how easily they could be fixed. Van, being the writer's tool to stating her own opinion in the novel, also is her tool to reflect the probable public reaction to Ellador and her conclusions." It always nettled me a little to have her laugh at us. That she should be shocked and horrified at the world I had expected; that she should criticize and blame; but to have her act as though all our troubles were easily removable, and we were just a pack of silly fools not to set about it-this was irritating" (Gilman, 168).By having Van acknowledge that Ellador's negative opinions on his world are offensive despite being true, the writer aims to make the reader relate.

III.a. Socialism

Ellador while promising solutions or making observations, often brings up socialism: "Next lamentable mistake,—failure to see that democracy must be economic... Meaning what Socialism means, or ought to mean... So you cannot have a democracy while there are people markedly differentiated from the others, with symbolism of dress and decoration, with courts and palaces and crowds of servitors."(Gilman 74).

Ellador also possesses a socialist perspective on marriage and homes. While not being opposed to the idea of marriage itself she is opposed to the making a business out of it; "(women kept at housework) that's part of it... I mean the whole thing: the men saddling themselves for life with the task of feeding the greedy thing, and the poor children heavily stamped with it before they can escape."(Gilman, 84). She believes the family relation is the oldest and democracy the newest so family has to adapt its ways to fit the benefit of the community instead of the home.

Her suggestion is "An economic administration of common resources under which the home would cease to be a burden and become an unconscious source of happiness and comfort. And, of course, the socialization of home industry."(Gilman, 87) which is the definition of 'communal housing'.

She believes the problem is 'the people with the power': " You let that group of conservatives saddle you with a constitution which has so interfered with free action that you've forgotten you had it"(Gilman, 87). She disses the idea "the government that is the best is the one that governs the least" -the basis of capitalism. Ellador also criticizes the bureaucracy, saying the city governments are corrupt from the policemen up. As the voice of the sociologist in the novel, Ellador also supports the idea of a government owned press, preferring press working for the interest of the majority over the press owned by a few working for the interest of those few. "Through it you see

and hear and feel—collectively. Through it you are incited to act—collectively."(Gilman, 104). When Van claims that that would not work because people will lie, Ellador says "Your people are so used to public lying that you don't mind. You are paralyzed, benumbed, calloused, to certain evils you should be keenly alive to. "(Gilman, 104). Gilman once again uses Ellador to criticize her country and the hypocrisy that capitalism has created. Ellador talks about how the owners of the industry make more profit than is fair and how nobody ever objects to it. When talking about the capitalist economy policy she uses the words "...that foolish laissez-faire idea."(Gilman, 67). Whilst doing so she praises socialism and suggests often that it is the best system. "The most inclusive forward-looking system is Socialism, of course. What a splendid vision of immediate possibilities that is. "(Gilman, 122)

Despite all the socialism supporting claims in the novel, there is still a lack of the equalist perspective needed for a socialist design. Ellador says racism isn't fair in one part and in another she says that the white Americans are the prior race and the immigrants are an obstacle. The stance the writer takes seems to be self-contradictory in this aspect. While on a ship, Ellador talks to a southern sociologist and tells Van about it; "He spoke of the innate laziness of the Negro race, their inborn objection to work, their ineducability-very strong on this but his deepest horror was "miscegenation."..."There is," He averred, "an innate, insuperable, ineradicable, universal race antipathy, which forever separated the Negro from the white." (Gilman, 160). The words of the southern sociologist describes the general thoughts of the Americans at the time. Gilman then uses Ellador to contradict these views. Ellador claims that, the under-developed state of the Negroes is because of the white men who did not provide them with the proper circumstances for progress. Ellador explains that more population than the land can handle and the government can assimilate, is the

thing and will cause the democracy to waver. "About the first awful mistake you made was in loading yourself up with all those reluctant Africans....And here they are, by millions and millions, flatly denied citizenship, socially excluded, an enormous alien element in your democracy" (Gilman, 169). Thus Ellador believes that multi-nationalism gets in the way and claims that for democracy to be present, there must be "one nation, one goal, one way"; "The real union is the union of idea; without that—no nation. ...It never occurred to you, that the poor and oppressed were not necessarily good stuff for a democracy." (Gilman, 68). This, for the most part, is a socialist point of view, however at the same time the prejudice against the poor, the blacks and immigrants that is present is not fitting with socialism or equalism.

Another example that Ellador uses to back up her claims on the impossibility of operating as a nation if different cultures are present is when she is commenting on the hate that Americans have for the Jews. "In the successive steps of social evolution, the Jewish people seem not to have passed the tribal stage... They could not maintain the stage of social organization rightly called a nation. Their continuing entity is that of a race, as we see in far lesser instance gypsies." (Gilman, 163). Gilman thus does not disagree with the racist beliefs of the time instead blames the patriarchal social structure for the inferiority of some races.

In the novel while America is being praised for its potential, Europe is described in a state of war and Asia is described as if it had been plagued with a sickness. Gilman's positive prejudice on her country reflects on Ellador's behavior in the novel. Ellador talks about the Americans as the prior race when compared to the rest of the world but the Americans she talks about is not all of the race groups that reside in America. She is only counting the white race as the developed race. "You could have safely welcomed to your great undertaking people of every race and nation who were individually fitted

to assist...because the human race is in different stages of development, and only some the races—or some individuals in a given race—have reached the democratic stage."(Gilman, 70) .This is the same racist approach that is evident in Herland but in this novel it is expressed much more clearly. The white race is the "Gold, silver, copper" and the other races are the "pipe clay, coal dust, and plain dirt" (Gilman, 70) that decrease the value of the metal when mixed in a "melting pot". And yet she makes anti-racist comments as well. "(Africans) And here they are, by millions and millions, flatly denied citizenship, socially excluded, an enormous alien element in your democracy...You will let them serve you and fight for you—but that's all, apparently. Nearly a tenth of the population, and not part of the democracy. And they never asked to come!" (Gilman, 69-70).She also says that she thinks the prejudice against the black is silly. To sum up, Gilman makes both racist comments and comments that are against racism thus she seems undecided and her racist approaches contradict her socialist and equalist ideas.

III.b. Feminism

This novel, unlike the first one is not focused on feminism as much as socialism however still has aspects to it that deliver the purpose. In the novel, Ellador often points out the positive discrimination men has had for centuries. When Terry speaks of the war as 'human nature' Ellador questions if some of the soldiers were ever women and gets the answer no and comes to an important conclusion; "Then why do you call it 'human' nature?" ... "Do you call bearing children 'human nature'?" she asked him. "Its

woman nature," he answered. "Then why do you not call fighting 'man nature'—instead of human?" (Gilman, 15-16). She makes the same distinction during multiple conversations; "Why do you say—'the male Scandinavians continually indulged in piracy,' and 'the male Spaniards practiced terrible cruelties,' and so on? It sounds so— invidious—as if you were trying to make out a case against men." "... You don't mind when I say 'the male Phoenicians made great progress in navigation,' or 'the male Greeks developed great intelligence,' do you?" "That's different...They did do those things." "Didn't they do the others, too?" (Gilman, 34). She points out that the men are in fact responsible for problems like hunger and war.

Ellador, however is most frustrated with the women of this world. She complains that they are submissive and ignorant however she is aware that it is not entirely their fault. "I can see that these women are dull enough. But then —if they do things differently there are penalties, aren't there?"... If the women innovate and rebel the least that happens to them is that the men won't marry them—isn't that so?" ... it means extinction— the end of that variety of woman. You seem to have quite successfully checked mutation in women; and they had neither education, opportunity, nor encouragement in other variation." (Gilman, 38). Ellador also points out that another reason why America is not a democracy is the fact that women are not a part of it.

Ellador finds the home industry problematic is due to the fact that the said industry binds the women to the home, men to feeding the home thus the child as well and results in a nation that does not work for the society and women that are ignorant to anything outside of home. "A man does not have to stay at home all day, in order to love it; why should a woman?" (Gilman, 138).

However Ellador thus the writer remains hopeful about the condition of the women until the end. "As soon as women are free, independent and conscientious. They have the power in their own hands, by natural law"(Gilman, 140).

IV. CONCLUSION

In her works Herland and With Her In Ourland, Charlotte P. Gilman, aims to transfuse socialist and feminist ideologies. While being ahead of her time in certain aspects, Gilman still does not seem to be able to separate herself from the racist approaches of Americans at her time and thus fails to explore socialism correctly. With an oversimplified understanding of evolution, she neglects factors like class, ethnicity, social conditions and gender, and contributes everything to one race being more superior than another. While defending socialism, the solutions she offers are neither realistic nor grounded and would serve no purpose in the real world therefore fails to set an example. However despite the fact that Gilman herself seems to tend to limit women in certain aspects, taking into account the time that the novel was written, the feminist messages that Gilman is trying to get through are important. Gilman is able to speak up about the inferiority that has been associated with women and how men have often been unable to reflect on their own flaws.

To conclude, while being self-contradictory on racism, ungrounded on socialism and having a quite narrow vision on feminism, Gilman still manages to create novels that are ahead of her time and can be regarded as lessons of history pulled from an American's mind.

Bibliography

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