



Patriarchy and Women: A Queer View of Gilman's *Herland* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Suparna Roy

Abstract

Patriarchy complicates the ranges of marginalization with fractured layers of efforts and Feminism has always tried to decode it by deconstructing the stated 'natural' constructions. Marginal lives have been represented by Literature through various segments and avenues which have heightened the issues in a significant manner. Feminism is a spectrum that has light up the disillusionment and dissent caused by the constructed 'norms' of maintaining the 'standard mainstream' to protect the vital 'order'! Feminism has provided a lens to perceive the 'wailing' lives caused and produced by culture, power, aesthetics, sentiments, and order. The theory has resulted in including intersectionality in the conceptual understandings of 'identities'. Therefore, my paper would try presenting a queer view of Gilman's *Herland* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: patriarchy, feminism, women, queer, culture

Simone De Beauvoir wrote that "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defence of her sex"¹ was Christine de Pizan who wrote *Epitre au Dieu d'Amour* (*Epistle to the God of Love*) in the 15th century. Feminist understandings have impacted a wide range of premises from culture to law significantly bringing about prominent changes. Feminist theory, a hermeneutical tool, has always focused on the vast spectrum of marginalized 'bodies'. This lens to perceive the 'wailing' lives caused and produced by culture, power, aesthetics, sentiments, and order has resulted in the inclusion of intersectionality within the conceptual understandings of 'identities'. Multiculturalism has portrayed both similarities and differences in diverse forms. Culture and the representation of women intersect each other into a complex fabricated network of tension that has represented the 'essentialized' identities of women restricted based on their genitalia. It cramps the self-identification of the 'body' by adopting 'cultural' norms and regulations in a restrictive pattern so that the established link of 'body and 'sex', 'gender' and 'sexuality' is carried on without any interrogation.

Herland is a utopian novel, written in 1915 by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The novel is the second in this trilogy by Gilman, preceded by *Moving the Mountain* (1911), and followed by *With Her in Ourland* (1916). The book was first published in monthly instalments in a series called *The Forerunners*, a monthly magazine based in New York City during the time of the women's suffrage movement.

Herland has been read chiefly as a feminist utopia. The women in Herland are the perfect 'parthenogenetic'² mothers, who give birth by asexual reproduction, and which is evidently their highest defining identity.³ While studying and analyzing *Herland*, critics have often not focused delved into the limitations pertaining to this novel as a Feminist Utopia. Georgia Johnston in her article – 'Three Men in Herland: Why They Enter the Text', primarily deals with the presence of men in Herland, explaining that men were introduced to mirror the reader's society.⁴ Gilman attempts to show a world comprising bodies that are defined as 'woman' that is nurtured and established as an established category of the 'woman'. Gilman also enters into the constructed pattern of understanding 'bodies' as a fixed and definite form of meaning and identity having a proper meaning. While talking about the 'metaphysics of substance', Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990) about the definition of 'self' and quotes from one of the critiques of 'metaphysics of substance' Michel Haar that the very "notion of psychological person" is "a substantive thing."⁵ Further, Butler, to emphasize the fact that body is just a "word". She quotes "...The subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious unities having at the start only a linguistic reality."⁶ Gilman's description of 'what a woman' is and how these identities should be perceived within a male-dominated society unknowingly limits itself to the threshold of patriarchy.

Within the scope of the novel, the world of men is projected as being 'unsafe' for women, emphasizing isolation rather than equality, which is portrayed when Vandyck, the male narrator says, "It looked safe and civilized enough"⁷ as opposed to a nation of women which appears to be "peaceful and sweet in expression".⁸ So, for Gilman, it is not patriarchy, but men who oppress the other sex. Does that mean Gilman considers men as synonymous with patriarchy and women as synonymous with feminism? What about the other genders that were considered non-existent, oppressed by power? Were the bodies defined as 'men' not a part of this category of gender? Then how do men become a source of 'un-civilization'? Gilman, by generalizing men, subscribes to patriarchy. She seems to overlook the fact that any 'body' that tried to deviate from the "legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality"⁹ became a victim of patriarchy.



Gilman's *Herland*, perhaps, aims at creating such 'ideal' pairings of 'male' and 'female' where the women consider sex as merely an 'ideal' process to have a child and not an act of pleasure. Besides, this was something they did not discuss much, as Gilman shows at the end of the novel, which then makes the novel validate Michel Foucault's statement: "The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had more right to discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps but quieter."¹⁰

The 'legitimate couple' becomes such a 'norm' that it does not become a feature of the 'utopic' world of 'women.'

Gilman describes a 'woman' in terms of bodily values – that is, they need to be chaste, pure and protect their virginity. In doing so, Gilman dehumanizes women and reduces them to bodies without any sexual urge and desire whose sole and "perfect identity" is to become a "pure mother"¹¹ as Gilman describes them with phrases like "parthenogenetic mothers"¹² and "Maiden Aunts"¹³ We can refer to Adrienne Rich's essay, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, where she mentions how lesbians were obliterated from literature and even from the mainstream feminist movement. She argues that society has made heterosexuality 'natural' so that it can be used as a violent political device to relegate women to a subordinate position. Women are psychologically conditioned to think that they need to get a man to be sexually satisfied.

African Literature with its vast spectrum ranges from oral literature to literature written in colonial languages and interestingly reveals many powerful political and cultural structures that operate to keep segregations intact. Chinua Achebe, to reorganize the lost confidence of Africans, represents the cultural roots of the Igbos in his work *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe also exposes how the universal principles vitiate the destructive potentials of the dignified Igbos who "had a philosophy of great depth and value...above all, they had dignity."¹⁴ In this effective representation of justice and dignity, the value of the body under the term 'women' gets significantly delegitimized. If Achebe is known as the patriarch of African Literature, then his representation of women, essentially in terms of reproduction and beauty is visible. Women are abused both physically and verbally. Women have been compared to the Earth, which is soil, which can nurture like a woman's womb and motherhood upheld to be their primary role in society. They have never been treated as individuals with desires, dreams and futures. They have been expected to marry and serve as a wife/maid. The story revolves around the protagonist Okonkwo and his efforts to preserve his self-pride as that 'masculine man'. The presentation of women (particularly Okonkwo's wives) in Achebe's novel is veiled by the 'masculine' tale of Okonkwo's dignity. Therefore, in my paper, I would explore the oppressive treatment and subdued identity of women in Achebe's presentation of the Igbo culture.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a novel that presents women with a sense of lack – she is the child-bearer, wife, and household maid for the husband, the children's educator, and a facilitator in her husband's polygamy. Women, in Achebe's novel, have been portrayed in relation to men. The 'body' determines the core identity of women in the Igbo culture. The Igbo people define and mark women based on their desirability among men. The women of their community were 'sold' in accordance with how "ripe" or "fresh" they were for marriage, which necessarily pointed to the onset of their puberty and productivity. When men came to examine and purchase the product, that is women, whom they wanted to buy, they decked up their bodies with jewellery to look more attractive in their state of "natural ripeness". "She was about sixteen and ripe for marriage. Her suitor and his relatives surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe enough."¹⁵

Marriage in the Igbo community was nothing beyond a game where women were sold as brides at a bride price: "Marriage should be a play...In this way, Akueke's bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries...the two parties came to this agreement."¹⁶

Physical abuse was quite common and was practised by Okonkwo on his wives. Ndulue becomes the sole exception in the Igbo community when he is found treating women on equal terms. The men of the community find justification in abusing women physically and verbally because they believe in female inferiority. "Uzowulu is a beast. My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years no single day passed in the sky without his beating the woman...when she was pregnant he beat her until she miscarried."¹⁷

Thus the social and cultural situation is presented in such a way that the real condition of the community in which the man is the 'signifier' and the women 'signified' is clearly revealed. Both politically and domestically women are seen as men's possession, the 'other' to the self (men). This patriarchal social construction is rooted in different cultures as presented in the stated literary texts, which constitute the complex network of multiculturalism.

This paper has thus attempted to understand the idea of the exclusion of women's in the two aforementioned works of Gilman and Achebe. It has tried to show how patriarchy and heterosexuality function to relegate woman's agency to the margins of the literary text.

Notes

¹ Aditi Dankar, 'Wattpad- History of Feminism', Chapter 3, Part 1

² Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Herland*. Vintage, 2015. p. 75

³ Another novel that presents societies comprising only women is Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), a science fiction novel that follows the lives of four women living in parallel worlds that differ in time and place. Their encounter at the end of the novel influences their ideas about what it means to be a 'woman'.

⁴ Georgia Johnston, 'Three Men in Herland: Why They Enter the Text.' *Utopian Studies*, No. 4,1991, pp.55–59. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20718947.

⁵ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*, Taylor and Francis, 2006. p. 29. (Haar, as cited in Butler, 29).

⁶ Haar as cited in Judith Butler, pg.29.

⁷ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, pg.15.

⁸ Gilman, 2015, p.147.

⁹ Foucault 1976, p.38.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Gilman, p. 75.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Gilman, p.78.

¹⁴ Achebe, 2019, p.7.

¹⁵ Achebe 2017, p.51.

¹⁶ Achebe, p.53.

¹⁷ Achebe, p.67.



Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2019

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*, Taylor and Francis, 2006

Dankar, Aditi. 'Chapter 3: History of Feminism Part 1'. *Wattpad – History of Feminism*. <https://www.wattpad.com/250123074-chapter-3-history-of-feminism-part-i>

Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*. Penguin, 1976

Georgia, Johnston 'Three Men in Herland: Why They Enter the Text.' *Utopian Studies*, No. 4, 1991, pp.55–59. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20718947

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. 'Herland'. *Herland and The Yellow Wallpaper*. Vintage, London, 2015.