

**The Feminist Metaphorics of Herland in
Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Poetry**

Asst. Prof. Amer Rasool Mahdi, Ph.D

Department of English

College of Arts – University of Baghdad

rasoolamer.ii@gmail.com

Abstract

As a primordial feminist writer and activist in the modernist times Charlotte Perkins Gilman produced an oeuvre that is so replete with the feminist metaphorics that draws on the feminist milieu of the times as well as engages the timeless Darwinist and Marxist legacies. Her feminist metaphorics is thus shown as rooted in utopianism as best represented in such fictional universes as *Herland* that, though apparently embedded in the economico-biological utopian theorizing and literature, tends to deviate from and re-contextualize the categorical and genre expectations about the female experience in a man-oriented world and literature. On the other hand, her poetry is energized and governed by the economics of writing that characterizes the feminist writing of all time, and even of the later women-poets; mainly, the urgent impetus to write differently and to procure change.

Keywords: Gilman, metaphorics, feminist, utopian, *Herland*.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's poetry in *Suffrage Songs and Verses*—which is anthologized in her *In This Ourland*—generally belongs to the protest literature, and, to mince words, to the literature of liberation. In these poems, one might venture to trace the genesis of the feminist and even *hysterical* tones coated with an evangelical creed of womanhood. This cult or creed has for its mythical archetype the mythus of the Amazonian women or even of the “militant madonna(s)” (Vertinsky 2001, 68), hence the kind of radical feminism she advocates in her poetry. On the other hand, Gilman is considered an earlier sociological activist and even one of the core classical theorists of feminism in the late nineteenth century. Both as an essayist and as a literary figure, she sought to promote the cause of the emancipation and empowerment of women.

It might be proposed here that her poetic adventure and sensibility rests, in a good part of it, on her unabatedly crude version of feminism that morphs into the metaphors of her fiction in *Herland* (1915) and its sequel *With her in Ourland* (1916). In the latter work she provides the reader with choice of a sexually integrated society as an answer to her ideal society, but in the former one her utopian foray into a woman-dominated society as a corrective to a male-controlled world one is a controversial option. Apart from the near-dystopian and utopian nuances in her fictions, her poetry seems to least tacitly address the antagonism between the female herlanders and male ourlanders without forsaking the metaphors of both worlds.

As a theorist, Gilman draws on Darwinism in biology and on Marxism in economics to build up her theoretical framework as well as symbology. The same holds true of her poetry; it is never far from being influenced by this theoretical endeavour. Gilman's poetry, like her fiction and her journalism, her prose tracts and her lectures, was devoted to her feminist commitment, more a form of activism than of aesthetics. Carl Sederholm thus summarizes her poetic adventure:

Although her poetry is often strong and direct, it is not very sensitive to the promptings of the Muse. Nevertheless, her capacity to inspire, irritate, and instruct proved sufficient to garner a large readership and to help Gilman situate herself squarely within a larger public sphere. (2013, 141)

Gilman thus brings together poetry, feminism, and the public sphere; challenging notions of privatization of women; rigorously deploying poetry as a public and social action.

In her "Females", both the Darwinian and the Marxist paradigms figure as the guiding—but not quite definitive—principles of her poetics. The Darwinian survival-for-the-fittest credo propels her poetic discourse right from the outset. Thus go the opening lines:

The female fox she is a fox;
 The female whale a whale;
 The female eagle holds her place
 As representative of race
 As truly as the male. (Gilman, 2012)

In the animal kingdom every female creature is positioned as should be, where it adheres instinctively to its place and plane of existence in the gender scheme of nature, and fills in its space in creation as exactly and naturally and as prestigiously as the males do. Gilman's

discourse goes on in the form of parallelisms to form her syllogism about the whatness of what, or here, the foxness of the fox and the whaleness of the whale. Hence, the question of femaleness is only considered to be dropped as far as animals are concerned.

In the second stanza, the reader is told that the performance of every female in its species is as perfect as that of the male in the same species, “The fleet-foot mare upon the course/ Doth hold her own with the flying horse—/ Yea and she beateth him!” This vein of evolutionary feminism is unmistakably permeating Gilman’s poetics as well as politics all throughout her lifetime’s corpus. This predilection for animalism that amounts to naturalism is also traced in her fiction. This is to be clearly shown in Agnes Malinowska’s questioning of the uses of animality in *Herland*: “Are Gilman’s Herlanders perfect animals or have they perfectly transcended the life of the body?” (2018, 60). In a manner of answering, Malinowska goes on elaborating:

Gilman builds her own *feminist* animal abstraction from the many instances of gender parity that she locates in the natural world; but the author’s theoretical animal is equally grounded in her notion of the original organism, a mythical life form at the beginning of evolutionary history. (2018, 63)

In the third stanza of the poem, one is met with Gilman’s predicate, when she comes to argue that the situation in Man’s world is wholly different from that of the animals. The female in Man’s world has a different story to tell; she is securing the place of a parasite:

One female in the world we find
Telling a different tale.
It is the female of our race,
Who holds a parasitic place
Dependent on the male.

In both Darwin’s biological scheme of being and Marx’s social division of labor, the human female/woman is consecutively “parasitic” and “dependent” on the male/man. Yet here, it is apt to argue that “for Gilman, evolutionism was a revolutionary resource for feminism, one of its greatest hopes” (Deutscher 2004, 35). The very meekness of human femaleness that she criticizes here is found to be, elsewhere in her theorizing, compensatory for the hiatus left by the destructiveness of the male power. However, woman is given a voice in the poem to argue counter to Gilman, and to express her

satisfaction with her being a child-bearer and a child-raiser, which is a very a time-consuming drudgery. To this Gilman's voice in the poem retorts that being reduced to the function of a wife confirms the inferiority of the human female. Here it might be argued that,

unlike many reform Darwinists, Gilman was a cultural feminist. She believed that women were the founders of human society, that women subsequently lost their power only after men gained ascendancy over them. Thus, Gilman challenged the male-oriented version of social Darwinism that stressed the natural origin of the status quo. (Deegan 1997, 32)

Darwinism and social Darwinists here might implicate the cultural role-faith and the socio-political interpolations that normalize the so-called natural status quo.

Moreover, in the larger scheme, it seems that there is no escaping the fate of being a wife for the woman. This is especially so when one goes back to the very etymology of the word (woman); in the old English, the syllable (wo) originally means (wife); hence woman indicates man's wife (*Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. 'Woman'). So, for women to escape this ontological/linguistic trap set by man, the originator and the language-maker, they should go farther beyond the question of womanhood:

The race is higher than the sex,
Though sex be fair and good;
A Human Creature is your state,
And to be human is more great
Than even womanhood!

Yet, even here, for the woman to belong to the human race sounds problematic, as far as the consistency of Gilman's feminist theory is concerned. For instance, in her discussion of the isolation of traditional house-wives, she ignored the fact that African American women may have had traditions of support and community that white women did not. And, of course, the entire notion of the isolated stay-at-home mom is out of sync with the fact that paid work has long been an important and valued dimension of Afro-centric definitions of Black motherhood. Therefore, her idea of belonging to the human race is deficient as she intends this race to be specifically the white race.

Gilman's poem, "Women of To-Day," seems to be more taken to localizing women in the context of their social and ideological prison of housewifery and house-holding. Gilman here, too, yearns for the

liberation and empowerment of women. She highlights the fact that the cult of domesticity has long legitimized the victimization of women. And she wonders whether this is going to be the suit of the women of to-day. Hence, she entices womankind to envisage the future when they will consider becoming something else.

You women of today who fear so much
The women of the future, showing how
The dangers of her course are such and such—
 What are you now?
Mothers and Wives and Housekeepers, forsooth!
Great names, you cry, full scope to rule and please,
Room for wise age and energetic youth!—
 But are you these?

In a series of rhetorical questions, the poet wonders whether the hegemony of the Victorian mentality that assigns the private space for women and expects them to be pious and to behave in a domestic manner will never cease to be. This perfect world of female domesticity is, as it were, prescribed by nature and ordained by God. These indeed are the authorities that have ever been marshaled to cement women to their places, and to insist that beyond these domestic ones they can have no right desires, including any other service.

Housekeepers? Do you then, like those of yore,
Keep house with power and pride, with grace and ease?
No, you keep servants only! What is more—

Home is socially and ideologically fictionalized, Gilman implies, for the woman to make-believe that this is the woman's herland, when she finally takes to the "caricatured roles of the innocent, passive Victorian Angel in the House" (Rich 2004, 159). This fictionalization of the woman's space might even be tracked down to the founding mythologies of America.

In his *Democratic Vistas* Whitman calls for "a new founded literature [that] as perhaps the most precious of its results" would insure to the nation "a strong and sweet Female Race, a race of perfect Mothers" (Whitman 1964, 2:372). Gilman's retort to the Whitmanic vistas might be found taking shape in other feminist, democratic vistas based on her conception and metaphors of *Herland* and of her version of pioneerism. In her elaboration of the notion of home and democracy, Gilman's counter-utopian heroine, Ellador, has this to say:

We isolated Herlanders never heard of Socialism... We had no German-Jewish economist to explain to us in interminable, and, to most people, uncomprehensible, prolixity, the reasons why it was better to work together for common good. Perhaps 'the feminine mind' did not need so much explanation of so obvious a fact. We co-mothers, in our isolation, with a small visible group of blood relations (without any Father-Boss) just *saw* that our interests were in common. We couldn't help seeing it. (Gilman 1997, 132)

The “feminine mind” whose ideation is disseminated in Ellador’s words seems to be departing from the other utopian language-makers—Marx, the “German-Jewish economist”, and Whitman for that matter—whose metaphoric needs to be questioned by the symbology of the female body and blood relations as advocated to by the poet’s quasi-utopian vision of the female society. The same holds true of Gilman’s criticism of other socialist utopians as she “appears to revise,” *inter alia*, “[Edward] Bellamy’s socialism which still relegates women to marginality and ‘otherness’” (Corporaal 2006, 212). Hence to the Whitmanic perfect mothers, Gilman, furthermore, has this questioning that has these dystopian overtones to it:

And mothers? Pitying Heaven!
 Mark the cry From cradle death-beds! Mothers on their knees!
 Why, half the children born, as children, die!
 You don't keep these!

Finally, the poet warns the herlanders, “these Mothers and Wives and Housekeepers,” that their domestic paradise will finally become a waste land when the children die and the babies come and go and the husbands leave, because in reality they “don't keep these”. This fictionalized space will ultimately be the attic to which other phalanx of women is consigned.

In conclusion, it might be gathered here that though Gilman’s poetry draws significantly upon the timeless bio-political theses and propositions that nourished the utopian thinking about the future to come for many marginalized groups and factions, it seems, however, that it finds itself at variance with some of its most insidious implications to the feminist cause the poet hot-headedly tries to promote. Yet, on the other hand, she seems to be so honest to her Herlandian poetics and polemics, and the near-utopian yearnings that enrich the mythico-literary space without losing touch with the topical and the situationist callings of the poet-activist she is.

References

- Corporaal, Margu rite. 2006. "Towards a Feminist Collectivism: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Nationalist Movement". Leiden October Conference, "The Literary Utopias of Cultural Communities, 1790–1945". University of Leiden. 25–27.
- Deegan, Mary Jo. 1997. "Introduction". In *With her in Ourland: Sequel to Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, edited by Mary Jo Deegan and Michael R. Hill, 1–57. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Deutscher, Penelope. 2004. "The Descent of Man and the Evolution of Woman." *1966-Hypatia* 19.2 (Spring): 35–55.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. 2012. *"In This Our World" and Uncollected Poems*. Edited by Gary Scharnhorst and Denise D. Knight. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press. All references to Gilman's verse are made to this edition, if not otherwise indicated.
- Malinowska, Agnes. 2018. "Technocratic Evolution: Experimental Naturalism and American Biopolitics around 1900." PhD Diss., University of Chicago.
- Rich, Charlotte. 2004. "From Near-Dystopia to Utopia: A Source for *Herland* in Inez Haynes Gillmore's *Angel Island*." In *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her Contemporaries*, edited by Cynthia J. Davis and Denise D. Knight, 155–170. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
- Sederholm, Carl. 2013. Review of *In "This Our World" and Uncollected Poems* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *The Journal of American Culture* 36.2: 140–41.
- Vertinsky, Patricia. 2001. "A Militant Madonna: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Feminism and Physical Culture." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 18.1: 55–72.
- Webster Collegiate Dictionary*. 10th edition.
- Whitman, Walt. *Prose Works 1892*. 1964. Edited by Floyd Stovall. New York: New York University Press.

الاستعارة النسوية لأرض النساء كما تتجسد
في شعر شارلوت بيركنز كيلمان

أ.م.د. عامر رسول مهدي
جامعة بغداد / كلية الآداب
قسم اللغة الانكليزية

مستخلص البحث

قدمت شارلوت بيركنز كيلمان، بوصفها من أوائل المتصدين للكتابة والشأن النسويين في بواكير الحداثة، نتاجا يشي بغزارة الاستعارة النسوية التي تنهل من البيئة النسوية حينذاك، وكذلك تركز على الموروثين الدارويني والماركسي. يتم التطرق ههنا لاستعاراتها النسوية بوصفها متجذرة في النزعة الطوباوية كما تتمثل في عملها السردية (ارض النساء). فعلى الرغم من ان هذا العمل متأصل في الطروحات الاقتصادية والبايولوجية وتمثلها الطوباوي في الفكر والادب فإنه يميل الى كسر الاطر الفكرية والمحددات الاجناسية فيما يخص تمثيل التجربة النسوية في عالم الرجل وآدابه. الا ان شعر كيلمان، من جانب آخر، يستمد دفته وشروطه من آليات الكتابة النسوية التي اصبحت سمة غالبية للنتاج النسوي وحتى المتأخر منه وذلك من خلال امتلاكه الواعز القوي للتضاد وهاجس التغيير.