

**EXISTENTIAL HUMANISM AND EGALITARIAN CIVILIZATION : A  
STUDY OF CHARLOTTE P. GILMAN'S *HERLAND***

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*Culture does not make people. People make culture. It is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture.*

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an American humanist, novelist, writer of short stories, poetry and nonfiction, and a lecturer for social reforms. The researcher has chosen the work *Herland*(1979) by Charlotte, for her social views and theories which were much dominated by humanist ideologies. One of her most powerful and authenticated arguments was based on the male aggressiveness and about the maternal roles for women. She wrote, “There is no female mind. The brain is not an organ of sex. Might as well speak of female liver.” Charlotte’s popularly known work *Herland* is an utopian and dystopian fiction which falls into the genre of speculative fiction with elements that do not exist in reality. *Herland* is a strong discourse on the individual power of women who do not need men for their survival.

*Herland* is a story that deals with a society where only women live and they reproduce through parthenogenesis. In creating such a society results in an amazing social order where there was no war, chaos or domination of one human over the other. Vandyak Van Jennings, a sociology student, with his two friends, forms a voyage party to explore an area unexplored. Van makes many notes about the new country and people. Anything and everything in the place seems to be made with the twin ideals of pragmatism and aesthetics. Van gradually finds out that most of the men were killed 2,000 years ago when a volcanic eruption sealed off the only pass out of Herland. After this had happened, the women devoted themselves in upgrading their minds. The grade as a teacher was the most honored and valued position in the land. Towards the end of the novel, with so much of realization Van Jennings leaves Herland with the heartfelt promises that he will not reveal the utopia. One of his friends, Jeff had chosen not to leave Herland but to live with his wife, Celis. Van had prepared Ellador and with much fear and anxiety returned to his world.

*Herland* has given an utopian definition of gender, motherhood, outlook on women and their roles, community living and reproductive rights. The reader could explicitly read that the utmost importance has been given to education and is highly valued. This understanding about the text has paved way for the researcher to analyze the text from few literary theories to evidently validate the arguments on the ideas of gender equality, humanism and egalitarian outlook in the contemporary world.

In so doing, the researcher brings in the concept of existence in contrast with the essence. According to Sartrean existentialism, existence of an individual is prior to his or her essence. Existentialism claims that the essence of a thing is more rudimentary and rigid than its existence.

The uniqueness and worth of an individual must be created by the self. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre brings out the fact that a personality is not built over an already mapped out archetype because “it is the human being who chooses to engage in such enterprise”. It is perceptible that there is no such preset essence to be found in human individuals and that an individual’s essence is elucidated by the individual through how that individual designs and lives his/her life. Sartre also establishes the idea that humans do not have an inbuilt purpose. They are free to make their choices and thereby they have the liberty and right to shape their essence according to their free will. It is only the individual who fixes his/her purpose and nothing else.

Thereby it is apparent that Charlotte Gilman has explicitly brought out the ideologies of Marxist Feminism, but the researcher has found the relevance with the Sartrean existential humanism also. Gilman does emphasis on the proposition that the nature of a thing is more elemental than the mere fact of its being which more and the same of what Sartre puts it as “existence precedes essence”. In creating an utopian society which is composed only of women, who live by their own norms, reveal the fact that any human individual is capable of creating and defining his/her individuality. In Herland, the women have their own purpose for their lives and their reason for their existence do not depend solely on their essence of being a woman. Gilman creates her character as human individuals who live their lives to the fullest of their satisfaction. There are no man in their world. They found no need for a male in their lives. Gender or sex seem to have no role to play in their lives. They fought their own battles for their survival. It is known evidently that the women in Herland do not fit into the stereotype of the women of Gilman's time nor to the contemporary era. It was always believed that women are inferior to men only for the reason that, no matter what, the women should depend on men to cherish their motherhood. This stereotype was totally shattered in Herland. Though it is a fictionalized utopian world, the women in Herland were all capable of their own selves for their own needs. Every woman was independent, did not suffer subordination and could find the perfect way to live their lives the way they want to live it.

Apparently, Sartre makes it very clear that any oppressive situation is not intolerable in itself but once regarded as such by those who feel oppressed the situation becomes intolerable. Such is the state of being for the women in Herland. Van discovered the fact that men were killed in a volcanic eruption in Herland. But the remaining men were slaves who killed the sons of their masters who has the intention to invade the land and the young women with it. That is when the women realized their power and the need to raise to the situation and fight the battle against the slaves and killed them. When they felt hopeless about their nearing end of their race, they gained their lost hope when one woman among the survivors became pregnant and bore a female child. When the individuals in the society once realizes their capability they gain the courage to fight against the oppressors and rise above the oppressors. The gender, race or any other oppressions are fought against.

Meanwhile, Gilman brings out the fact that when an individual is lightened up with the self realization and the self acceptance, the individual gain the needed economic independence. Establishing such an ideology brings in the theory of Marxist feminism which peruses the ways in which women are exploited through capitalism and the individual ownership of private property. According to Marxist feminists, women’s deliverance can only be attained by deconstructing the capitalist systems in which they assert much of women’s labor is gratuitous. *Herland* is an ultimate economic model that favors the female workers. Gilman sees that the transferring of female domestic labor from the private to public sphere is the only way to achieve fair compensation for women. Gilman in her *Herland* satirizes the fact that the intense

labor of child care does not fit into the system of labor in the men's world. Terry, one of the two friends of Van who landed in Herland, expresses that, "in the U. S. the majority of women stay home instead of 'working'. The women wonder what he means by saying the women do not "work" – is caring for children not considered work?" (124).

Yet another concept that is dealt in Marxist feminism is the idea of gender roles that destroy the society. Gilman brings forth her arguments in three categories in *Herland*, according to Deborah L. Madsen proving the ideologies of Marxist feminism. Gilman primarily highlights how the social forms work to bring down the capabilities and potentials that are inherently present in a female as a human. She also foregrounds the fact that how women could come up and attain the heights out of their own free will when they are liberated from these social order. Finally Gilman represents the utopian world, as it should be rather than it is, in other words, an egalitarian society which is a society where all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

With such an emphasis on equality and equal treatment across gender, religion, economic status and political beliefs, Gilman does not present a radical feminist perspective but a genuine expectation of having the equality. Equality, in other words, presents the beauty that lies in the humanity by giving the space for each individual without gender inequality. Gilman thus uses the intersectionality that operates in Marxist feminism as a lens to view interaction of different aspects of identity.

Eventually, the researcher establishes not the radical way of looking into life but to bring in the dignity of human beings as they are. With the established note of Sartre, it is clear that human individuals define themselves. An individual first of all exists, encounters him/herself, surges up in the world and defines him/herself afterwards.

### **Work Cited**

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