



Deconstructing Patriarchy and Gender Norms: Comparative Analysis of Power Dynamics in Dystopian Narratives in *The Power* by Naomi Alderman and *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Apoorva Chaudhary

Date of Submission: 24-04-2024

Date of Acceptance: 02-05-2024

Abstract

These texts emphasize that gender is a socially constructed concept, as noted by Simone de Beauvoir, not inherent but taught and shaped by culture. The literary works "Herland" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and "The Power" by Naomi Alderman give crucial insights into how gender is formed in society. In *Herland*, women are seen as leaders in their own right; the novel's antagonist Jeffery is an example of a man who survives well with females. As a result, characters like Terry, Jeff and Van exemplify the transition of men in such environments where there are no differences among genders. Additionally, it challenges traditional ideas about motherhood and childbearing; this brings to focus adaptable sexual differentiation. Similarly in "The Power," Alderman's book portrays a world where women now have physical power which disrupts gender norms and power hierarchies. For example, Allie, Roxy, Margot and Tunde show how intersecting issues of race, class and sexuality can shape individual experiences. Moreover Alderman's story emphasizes on recognizing intersectionality for social justice. These texts emphasize that gender is a socially constructed concept shaped by cultural learning rather than innate characteristics according to Simone De Beauvoir.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Patriarchy, Gender norms, Power dynamics, dystopian narratives, Feminist literary criticism, Intersectionality, Societal norms, Gender and power.

I. Introduction

It should be noted that patriarchy remains in society due to male dominance based on masculinity traits while femininity is looked down upon i.e., denigrated leading to inequality between males and females. Patriarchy therefore maintains unequal gender relations through privileging certain masculine attributes while undermining

feminine ones. Also it must be realized that societies have definite expectations towards what men or women are allowed to do or say based on societal beliefs as regards their nature as males or females. Ancient civilizations gave root to patriarchy and gender norms have been reinforced by cultural, religious, and societal institutions.

Women's subjugation is seen in literature such as the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" by Homer. The Bible and the Quran are religious books that affirm male dominance. Women's access to education, economic opportunities, and reproductive rights is restricted by these frameworks.

Men suffer from patriarchy and cultural norms that impose strict codes of manliness, which limit their emotions and self-expression. Men are pushed to become breadwinners and providers thereby sacrificing family relationships. Despite social improvements towards addressing this situation much work remains to attain full gender equality.

Literature depicts societal injustices and serves as a platform for challenging patriarchal norms. Female writers often took advantage of feminism waves to criticize different views on society based on books they wrote. Narratives like Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Alderman's *The Power* question male-centrism through deconstruction as suggested by Derrida. Alderman's novel *The Power* demonstrates how physical power reversal among women challenges patriarchal stereotypes through deconstruction. This story is about how women use this newly acquired authority against present oppressions while claiming their personal freedom.

Conversely, "Herland" by Gilman presents a society devoid of men, offering a utopian vision where women thrive independently. Through the experiences of characters in both works, readers confront the differences between patriarchal societies and alternative, gender-equal worlds.



These literary works contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender by highlighting the malleability of societal constructs and the potential for transformative change. By deconstructing patriarchal norms and envisioning alternative realities, Alderman and Gilman challenge readers to reconsider entrenched beliefs about gender and power.

II. Literature Review

The patriarchal system perpetuates gender inequality by prioritizing masculine traits and devaluing feminine qualities, shaping cultural expectations and behaviors. This system, deeply rooted in history and influenced by ancient civilizations and religious texts, hinders women's access to education, economic opportunities, and reproductive rights. Moreover, it imposes strict behavioral and emotional expectations on men. While progress has been made in challenging patriarchy, achieving full gender equality remains a work in progress.

Restore response Patriarchy and Women: A Queer View of Gilman's Herland by Suparna Roy says that Gilman challenges the notion that patriarchy alone oppresses women, suggesting that men themselves contribute to this oppression. The novel depicts the male-dominated world as 'unsafe' for women, emphasizing isolation and inequality. Gilman presents a contrasting vision of a nation of women, portrayed as 'safe' and 'civilized,' highlighting the potential for equality and harmony absent in male-dominated societies.

In A Journey of feminist rebellion through Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel Herland by Arzu Özyonl portrays a matriarchal society disrupted by the arrival of three men. Despite sharing radical feminist principles, the novel uniquely emphasizes femininity, depicting strong, athletic women who assume traditionally male roles. Exploring themes of parenting, fertility, and education, "Herland" offers a distinct perspective on gender roles and equality. The male protagonist's struggle to accept women's rule, challenging their notions of power and gender. Gradually, the novel reveals the equality and harmony of the matriarchal society, critiquing patriarchal structures and advocating for gender equality.

Mazhar Hayat's feminist analysis of Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" focuses on Offred as a symbol of victimhood in a male-dominated society. Offred grapples with her role as a servant forced to bear children for infertile politicians, striving for intellectual autonomy and

self-realization amid oppressive circumstances in Gilead.

Naomi Alderman, influenced by her Jewish background and mentored by Margaret Atwood, explores power dynamics, gender issues, and dystopian societies in her novel "The Power." Drawing inspiration from feminist science fiction, Alderman challenges traditional gender roles, emphasizing moral equality between sexes. Her narrative, using multiple viewpoints and nonlinear storytelling, engages readers in contemplating power's potential misuse. By portraying a world where women hold supernatural power over men, Alderman prompts critical reflection on societal norms and gender inequities. Her unapologetic exploration of power dynamics captivates readers, contributing to the novel's critical acclaim and feminist discourse.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an American author and feminist, challenged gender norms and advocated for women's economic independence. Her famous work "The Yellow Wallpaper" critiqued the medical treatment of women. Gilman's writings focused on female roles in society and contributed to feminist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Her impact continues to be felt in feminist literature and social transformation.

Author centric approach

In 1915, Gilman published "Herland," reflecting her activism against gender inequality. The novel questions male dominance and envisions a society governed by women. It challenges patriarchal norms, promoting education and employment for women. However, it risks oversimplifying gender roles and excluding diverse perspectives. Future developments of feminist literature should address intersectionality and explore gender complexities beyond binary constructs.

Both Gilman's "Herland" and Naomi Alderman's "The Power" explore the corruptibility of power, regardless of gender. They serve as warnings against unchecked authority. Gilman's work remains relevant in contemporary debates on feminism, urging for inclusivity and diverse voices in gender struggles analysis.

Reversing Roles: Unveiling Herland's Matriarchal Paradox

The concept of matriarchy has long fascinated scholars, writers, and social thinkers, offering an alternative to the patriarchal structures dominating societies for centuries. While historical



evidence for matriarchal societies remains debated, glimpses from classical myths and cultures like the matrilineal Minangkabau of West Sumatra suggest its possibility.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel "Herland," published in 1915, explores the reversal of gender roles in a fictional utopian society inhabited solely by women. This matriarchal structure challenges conventional norms and hierarchical power dynamics, offering insights into the potential positive aspects of matriarchy, such as increased opportunities for nurturing, collaboration, and empathy.

The male protagonists of "Herland" find themselves in a position of inferiority due to their unfamiliarity with the society's customs. Their journey and interactions with the women of Herland highlight the biases and challenges associated with gender roles, prompting readers to reflect on societal expectations based on gender.

Gilman portrays three distinct male characters representing prevalent attitudes towards women in the 20th century. Vandyck, a sociologist, views women as objects of study, while Terry embodies misogynistic ideas, seeking to assert dominance over women. Jeff, a doctor, idealizes women as delicate and in need of protection. However, his perceptions change as he forms meaningful relationships with the women of Herland.

Herland is depicted as a paradise, free from the flaws and vices of the outside world. The society is characterized by its advanced agriculture, cleanliness, and emphasis on education. Women in Herland are depicted as strong, intelligent, and capable individuals, challenging traditional gender stereotypes.

The women of Herland are progressive and forward-thinking, prioritizing the well-being of future generations. They exhibit qualities of nurturing, collaboration, and empathy, contrasting with the competitive and materialistic nature of the outside world.

Through the portrayal of Herland, Gilman critiques patriarchal society and raises questions about the role of men in shaping the world. She highlights the importance of cooperation and common goals, suggesting that the pursuit of power and material wealth is ultimately meaningless.

It can be said, "Herland" offers a thought-provoking exploration of matriarchy and its potential implications for society. Gilman's depiction of Herland as a utopian paradise challenges traditional gender norms and presents an alternative vision of societal organization. By

contrasting the flaws of the outside world with the virtues of Herland, Gilman prompts readers to reconsider their assumptions about gender, power, and societal structures.

Gender Construction in Society

Gender construction in society is a socially constructed concept influenced by cultural, familial, and societal standards. Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" challenged traditional gender roles, advocating for women's liberation. "Herland" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman explores gender roles, depicting empowered women in a utopian society. Meanwhile, "The Power" by Naomi Alderman examines gender dynamics in a world where women gain power, challenging traditional norms. These works demonstrate that gender expectations are socially constructed and can be challenged, highlighting the importance of understanding gender as a product of socialization rather than inherent traits.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, underscores the interconnectedness of social identities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, leading to varied forms of discrimination and privilege. In "The Power" by Naomi Alderman, characters like Allie, Roxy, Margot, and Tunde face oppression and discrimination shaped by multiple facets of their identity. Allie, marginalized by class and race, struggles to be believed after being raped. Margot navigates the challenges of being a female politician, facing judgment on her appearance and family dynamics. Roxy confronts gender expectations in her criminal family, eventually seizing power herself. Tunde, a Nigerian journalist, experiences shifts in power dynamics globally, witnessing societal upheavals. In "Herland" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, although not directly addressing intersectionality, characters like Terry, Jeff, and Van represent different intersections of male identity. Terry embodies traditional masculinity and discrimination, while Jeff embraces equality and adaptation, and Van offers rational observations on prejudice. Both novels serve as lenses to explore the complexities of intersectionality, highlighting how societal structures influence discrimination and privilege based on various social identities.



III. Conclusion

The exploration of patriarchy deconstruction and gender norms within dystopian literature, notably Naomi Alderman's "The Power" and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Herland," provides profound insights into societal constructs concerning gender dynamics. Drawing from Derrida's concept of deconstruction, which extends beyond linguistic instability to encompass shifting power dynamics, these narratives challenge the traditional male-centric societal structure.

Published in 1915, "Herland" emerged during a time when women faced substantial societal limitations and discrimination. Women were relegated to subordinate roles, lacking access to education, employment, and political participation. Gilman's narrative challenges these stereotypes by depicting a society governed by women. It portrays feminine qualities such as motherhood and emotional intelligence as foundational to a thriving civilization, countering perceptions of female inferiority perpetuated by patriarchal societies.

Contrastingly, "The Power," published in 2016, reflects a contemporary context where gender inequality persists despite advancements in women's rights. Women still encounter systemic barriers in areas like the gender pay gap, leadership representation, and gender-based violence. Alderman's narrative imagines a world where women possess physical dominance over men, revealing the complexities and flaws of power dynamics. While traditional gender roles blur, societal scars remain evident in power abuse and empathy erosion.

While "Herland" envisions a harmonious society led by women, "The Power" exposes the dangers of power imbalances, transcending gender binaries to address deeper issues of power and dominance inherent in human nature. The narratives caution against idealizing any single gender's ability to create a perfect society, emphasizing the need for empathy, cooperation, and justice beyond gender confines.

In conclusion, the deconstruction of patriarchy and gender norms in dystopian literature offers a critical lens to examine societal power structures. By juxtaposing narratives from different eras, we gain insights into the evolution of gender roles and the ongoing struggle for equality. While progress has been made, both narratives underscore the importance of addressing underlying issues of power and discrimination. Ultimately, true equality requires a broader vision encompassing diversity,

inclusivity, and mutual respect, as we navigate towards a more just and equitable world.

Work cited

Primary Texts

- [1]. Alderman, Naomi. *The Power*. Penguin Random House, 2016.
- [2]. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland*. Dover Publications, 1979.

Secondary Texts

- [3]. Abshavi, Mojgan, and Zaman Kargozari. "The Discourse of Gender and Power in Naomi Alderman's *The Power*." *The Journal of Social Sciences Research* 6.9 (2020): pp: 818-825. ISSN(e): 2411-9458, ISSN(p): 2413-6670
- [4]. Atwood, Margaret & Jahanforouz, Salomeh. (2019). *The Handmaid's Tale*
- [5]. Hayat, Mazhar & Maqbool, Tabassum & Akhter, Saira. (2015). A Feminist Study of Self-Actualisation in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Ali's *Brick Lane*. *ELF Annual Research Journal* 17. (209-220).
- [6]. Roy, Suparna. "Patriarchy and Women: A Queer View of Gilman's *Herland*." *Intersections: A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies* (Volume 1 2021) pp: 36-40.
- [7]. Nash, Catherine J. "Patriarchy." *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, edited by Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift, 2nd ed., vol. 9, Elsevier, 2020, pp. 01. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B9780081022955102069Q>
- [8]. Omvedt, Gail. "The Origin of Patriarchy." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 22, no. 44, 1987, pp. WS70-72. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4377665>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2024. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4377665?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- [9]. Arora, Veenat, and Anil Kumar Mishra. "Women and Religion: Portrayal of Women in Christianity and Islam." *Samajbodh*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan.-June 2016, pp. XXX-XXX. ISSN 2231-0207. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314200992_Women_and_Religion_Portrayal_of_Women_in_Christianity_and_Islam
- [10]. de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2011. eISBN: 978-0-307-81453-1. https://www.hansrajcollege.ac.in/hCPanel/uploads/elearning/elearning_document/1949_simone-de-beauvoir-the-second-sex.pdf



- [11]. Krishnan, Gokila G., Anagha Arjun, and Smrithi. "Men in a Patriarchal Society and Issues." *International Journal of Advanced Research in Engineering and Technology (IJARET)*, vol. 11, no. 11, November 2020, pp. 511-515. Article ID: IJARET_11_11_047. IAEME Publication, DOI: 10.34218/IJARET.11.11.2020.047. https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/66112847/IJARET_11_11_047-libre.pdf?1616822715=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DMEN_IN_A_PATRIARCHAL_SOCIETY_AND_ISSUES.pdf&Expires=1711862858&Signature=RJLS9OtTW-P7HhaK5oWu11sK-JfoaYKiE9loxppeE7Z91tcPcLX5bBwfPuyFvzvsM5vc4tWx5kD2vBHhvXAX~ZOJ9-1F0nbGT~y3IHcHUwETB-f2OD6TX61s~ysDu15ukL4fffEBVmTdwB7EFvNDwlMDsVBdCPSHoZFX0akFt8Myv1phL7XZZKzy3ct2JiUSegsYKZs0JJQfRQ03Ub3C-msg7ondWLqpDBw5wPPOpMds9jgIo7sZeChPcjt4rWA0DWwAPvuB6RSZnIns0Zx0CKAVVf1zH47ec~4XwLLJhA2m2~4Xt-WrAGlxOovT5BvCPHLgNMAK4iV~KWqaUEQ6tQ__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA
- [12]. Mandal, Keshab Chandra. "Concept and Types of Women Empowerment." *International Forum of Teaching and Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2013, p. 17. http://americanscholarspress.us/journals/IFST/pdf/IFOTS-2-2013/IFOTS_v9_n2_art3.pdf
- [13]. Showalter, Elaine. "Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1/2, 1984, pp. 29-43. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/463823>. Accessed 31 Mar. 2024. https://www.jstor.org/stable/463823?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents
- [14]. Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, Routledge, 1978, pp. 278-293. <http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/sign-play.html>
- [15]. Brown, Jeffrey. "The Power' author Naomi Alderman answers your questions." YouTube, uploaded by PBS NewsHour, 2019. <https://youtu.be/ggJVj1u868s?si=L6obJ5PktjmqSAnf>
- [16]. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 6 Mar. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charlotte-Perkins-Gilman>.