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Natural Harmony vs Gender

The issues of gender roles, femininity and sexuality became most controversial in the modern world. It may seem that feminist and queer theories are inventions of the information age, but the questions of female sexuality, femininity and gender roles imposed by society can be tracked to the ancient Greece and famous female philosopher Sappho, who was one of the very few to speak of the controversial matter of all times. In the present paper, the work of another famous feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman is discussed.

In her utopian novel “Herland” (1919), Gilman created a symbolic critical analysis of the American patriarchal society contemporary to her. Through the male images of the Van, Terry and Jeff, the author showed various styles of male attitudes to women in the patriarchal American society. Terry embodied aggressive attitude to women, who were viewed as subjects for fulfilment of male orders and in service of male pride. In this regard, Terry suggested “what does man care for motherhood – when he hasn’t a ghost of a chance at fatherhood?” (Gilman 50). In this context, Gilman criticised American social perception of women as vessels for giving meaning for male existence and strengthening men’s pride. Two other characters of Jeff and Van embodied knight chivalry and philosophical rationale, respectful perception to women but in a sense of more vulnerable than man (Gilman 25).

The author did not only criticise male attitude to women in the American society and lack of their comprehension unnatural essence of their treatment, she criticised a lack of comprehension of women as living beings,

who were capable of much more than men could ever imagine – giving life. In this regard, Gilman praised harmony of motherhood and nature of human existence. In this context, she wrote: “ by motherhood they were born, and by motherhood they lived - life was, to them, just a long cycle of motherhood” (Gilman 96). Comparing this to Terry’s previous statement, Gilman criticised patriarchal society for diminishing female role, limiting motherhood spirit within them and inborn ability to evolve to the natural ideal being – self-sufficient, courageous, beautiful and strong at the same, and straightforward. In this regard, Gilman criticised femininity as it was perceived in the American society, which was bearing Victorian ideal of woman, depriving her of identity and natural power of motherhood. In the American society, the sacredness of motherhood was substituted by romance, flirting and indulgence of men by playing roles of submissive and weak creatures. This aspect was described in Van’s phrase about love-making: “ of course we want children, and children come – but that is not what we think about” (Gilman 117).

Gilman did not condemn all men for the poor situation of women in her contemporary society but challenged the society ruled according to dogmas of patriarchy. She considered that depending on the combination of personal inclinations and severity of impact of patriarchal society on an individual, he might accept a different perspective of “ genuine” femininity and human nature, meaning unity of men and women irrespective of gender limitations. Such position is showed by the evolution of thoughts of three men in the novel. Each of them is changed in a different way mainly because they all had different connection with the patriarchal society of their own. Jeff

who initially respected women, but believed that they were weak and had to be protected; continued to explain traditions of his country, but was amazed by natural abilities of Herland women (Gilman 34). This was conditioned by lack of strong patriarchal impact on his personality. Van said that Jeff “ had become so deeply convinced of the almost supernatural advantages of this country and people, that he took this medicine like a – I cannot say “ like a man,” but more as if he wasn’t one ”(Gilman 105).

Terry considered that women should be submissive and hunted as prey, yet even he felt real feelings for a strong woman like Alima, and “ their tempestuous courtship, quarrels and reconciliations had fanned the flame” (Gilman 121). From certain perspective, he was eager to view woman as his equal, but he could not understand yet that he had to control the primeval beast indulged by the patriarchal society inside and be equal to his partner also in love-making and family construction. Therefore, he showed change in perception but interrupted and followed by denial. Van as philosopher was changing his impression of women gradually, cautiously and consciously. He was the one to comprehend and emphasise the inconsistencies between two societies. Unlike Jeff, he was not automatically drawn by matriarchate, only because he craved for it; rather he was gradually convinced by his partner Ellador and their rational discussions. He finally came to conclusion that his civilisation was “ full of failures and wastes”, and women managed to rule better than men (Gilman 80).

Another essential issue described in the novel is diversity and shades in such matters as masculinity and femininity outlined by the author. On the example of Herland women, Gilman showed existence of different forms of

masculinity. The main missing form of masculinity in female society was aggressive and dominant one, which can be compared to the one shown by Terry. On the other hand, neutral forms of masculinity which do not depend on gender, such as physical and intellectual strength, ability to take responsibility for personal actions and their consequences were represented by the very essence of Herland culture. Until certain extent, this masculinity can be viewed as natural order of self-realisation or “ genuine femininity” of motherhood. On the other hand, Herland women lack American or patriarchal “ femininity” as a role played for the men in their society. In this context, Herland women lack pretended weakness, perceived limited mind and world overview and desire to please men with the role given to them. Overall, Gilman emphasised that according to natural order, femininity and masculinity are mutually-substituting phenomena, because, in the end, both sexes are equal in their human nature and self-expression.

Work Cited

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. Herland. New York: Dover Publication. 1995. Print.