39-An intersectional reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*: Challenging dichotomies

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's literary utopia, *Herland* (1915) is one of the pioneering texts of utopian literature. The story is narrated by a male character, Van Jennings, who shares his impressions of the utopian land of women, Herland. Three male characters, namely Vandyck Jennings, Terry O. Nicholson and Jeff Margrave, all American, go on an expedition by plane, somewhere in South America, to find out about the mysterious land called Herland, which consists entirely of women, as they are thrilled at the idea of such a country. This journey gradually leads these male characters to question the working mechanism of the projected patriarchal order, though on differing levels. In the light of these male characters' geographical and metaphorical journey, this article analyzes and discusses *Herland* through an intersectional reading in order to illustrate how intersecting factors do play an integral role in social inclusion or exclusion. This approach also exposes how Gilman's text challenges and disrupts the hegemonic discourse, essentialist categorizations, binary oppositions, and culturally embedded assumptions about gender. The ultimate aim of this critical discussion is then to demonstrate the need to adopt a non-binary approach in order to facilitate the formation of a world order that may be free from the restrictive boundaries of the existing discursive practices.

Keywords: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, gender, intersectionality, non-binary

Charlotte Perkins Gilman'ın *Herland* eserinde bir kesişimsel okuma denemesi: İkili karşıtlıkları sorgulamak

Öz

Charlotte Perkins Gilman'ın edebi ütopyası olan *Herland* (1915), ütopya edebiyatının öncü metinlerindendir. Hikâye, kadınlardan oluşan Herland isimli ütopik ülkeye dair izlenimlerini paylaşan erkek kararkter, Van Jennings tarafından anlatılmaktadır. Amerikalı Vandyck Jennings, Terry O. Nicholson ve Jeff Margrave'den oluşan üç erkek karakter Herland denilen gizemli ülkeyi bulmak için Güney Amerika taraflarında bir yere uçakla sefer düzenlerler. Tamamen kadınlardan oluşan böylesi bir ülke düşüncesi bu karakterleri heyecanlandırır. Bu yolculuk, her ne kadar farklı seviyelerde olsa da bu üç karakterin yansıtılan ataerkil toplum düzeninin iç mekaniğini yavaş yavaş sorgulamasını sağlar. Bu çalışma, karakterlerin coğrafi ve mecazi yolculuğunun ışığında, kesişimsel okuma yöntemiyle *Herland* eserini ele alarak tartışacaktır. Bu yaklaşım, kesişen faktörlerin toplumsal kapsayıcılık ya da toplumsal dışlanma konularında ne kadar önemli bir rol oynadığını ortaya çıkaracaktır. Ayrıca, bu bakış açısı Gilman'ın eserinin baskın söylemi, özcü kategorileri, ikili karşıtlıkları ve toplumsal cinsiyete dair kültürel olarak yerleşmiş varsayımları nasıl altüst edip

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RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi 2020.21 (Aralık)/ 661

Charlotte Perkins Gilman'ın *Herland* eserinde bir kesişimsel okuma denemesi: İkili karşıtlıkları sorgulamak / E. Atasoy (660-668. s.)

çökerttiğini gösterecektir. Sonuç olarak bu eleştirel tartışmanın nihai amacı, ikili karşıtlıkların yer almadığı yeni bir yaklaşımı benimseme ihtiyacı olduğunu göstermektir çünkü ikili olmayan bir yaklaşım, mevcut söylemsel uygulamaların kısıtlayıcı sınırlarından uzak bir dünya oluşum olasılığını mümkün kılabilir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, toplumsal cinsiyet, kesişimsellik, ikiliksiz

Theoretical background: Intersectionality and utopian narrative

A binary approach is created and promoted through socially and artificially constructed categories, which in return engender the formation of strict dichotomies. Such an approach based on those classifications becomes influential in including and/or excluding individuals, groups and communities socially. It may also lead to the implementation of suppressive practices because these categorizations are so deeply embedded in our cultural assumptions about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, physical features and status. The intersections of those axes together with those assumptions play a vital role in our approach to identity and various social groups.

However, it has now become imperative to challenge and to deconstruct these binary oppositions within the context of today's world conjuncture, which can enable the establishment of a social order that may be free from gender inequality and other forms of suppression since gender as a concept is itself highly problematic. In this regard, such a category based on gender needs to be deconstructed in order to gain a new insight into such relations. Deconstruction, which is "an approach to a critique of traditional concepts animating the structure of language and a series of techniques for reading texts" can accordingly reveal the artificially constructed nature of these categories and binary thinking (White, 2017, p. 235). This can make it possible to suggest multiple potentialities and various alternative approaches in lieu of fixed strict taxonomic classifications, as the demarcations between dualities have become highly blurred.

Intersectionality, which Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced in 1989 through her discussion of black women's situation in the United States, can play a crucial role in such an attempt to challenge dichotomies, especially when it comes to men/women dichotomy, and to indicate how they are not natural. An example of traffic in an intersection is given in order to explain different factors in one's discrimination or social exclusion:

> The point is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional. Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

In this respect, intersectionality may expose how exclusion in various forms might occur as a result of gender, social class, ethnicity, or their intersections. Furthermore, it can also portray how gender oppression may not depend on only one axe, but many other intersecting factors, as they may play a major role together with other repercussions in policies of exclusion. What does intersectionality refer to then? Intersectionality stands for "the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of

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differences in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008, p. 68).

Critical engagement with such an interaction becomes instrumental and functional in questioning and challenging essentialist categorizations, as it plays a central role in power relationships that may have a drastic effect over policies of inclusion and exclusion. Awareness of those intersecting axes discloses the vital role of social divisions and Weltanschauung thereof:

> Social divisions have organizational, intersubjective, experiential and representational forms, and this affects the ways we theorize them as well as the ways in which we theorize the connections between the different levels . . . they involve specific power and affective relationships between actual people . . . Social divisions also exist in the ways people experience subjectively their daily lives in terms of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage, specific aspirations and specific identities. Importantly, this includes not only what they think about themselves and their communities but also their attitudes and prejudices towards others (Yuval-Davis, 2009, pp. 49-50).

Yuav-Davis's remarks explicitly demonstrate what kind of external factors do matter in our judgement of the events, situations, or other people. The ramifications of such factors and their entanglement may become the key determining element as to whether we agree to include or exclude someone or a specific group. An intersectional approach to such categories can also help us "identify the sites where difference is being created and diversity managed as well as those where long-term relations of inequality threaten to burst out from the regulation of states and hegemonic ideologies" (Ferree, 2015, p. 36).

An intersectional reading of a text can also highlight how gender is a performance and make one aware of the fact that it is constructed. As acceptance or denial of someone into a group, a culture, or a society depends on certain normative expectations and societal responsibilities, disclosing various intersecting factors enables one to become aware of the fabricated nature of gender. The concepts of doing gender and performativity in this respect illustrate how gender is not natural:

> If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding masculinity or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the performative aspect of gender is concealed (Butler, 1988, p. 528).

Butler's insight into the concept of gender as performance divulges the constructed nature of categories like gender; therefore, their reliability and validity must be questioned. An intersectional approach to gender can thus help one comprehend what kind of other axes do matter in power relationships between both sexes. It can also illustrate how they may lead to differing practices and yielding of power, which can result in social inclusion or exclusion.

Utopian narratives and literary utopias in this respect can provide a suitable realm with their generic features for such an intersectional reading. Utopian fiction, which is capable of "highlighting the socially constructed, and hence potentially transformable character of existing reality, and also of providing images of the utopian moment---glimpses of the almost infinite possibilities" is in quest for alternative possibilities and a relatively *better* social order than the current one (Ferns, 1999, p. 235). In addition, it questions the working mechanism of the experienced system by portraying alternative

RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi 2020.21 (Aralık)/ **663**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman'ın *Herland* eserinde bir kesişimsel okuma denemesi: İkili karşıtlıkları sorgulamak / E. Atasoy (660-668. s.)

possibilities. In literary utopias, which are "blueprints of the good … society, imagined elsewhere and intended as prescriptions for the near future … [and] intrinsically linked to the concerns and assumptions of modernity" various ingrained approaches to race, ethnicity, gender, and other axes may be challenged (Levitas, 2003, p. 3). This may be realized through the representation of imaginary world orders since exposing the problematic aspects of the existing order is situated at the center of the text. In the light of these insights into gender, gender relations, and the internal mechanics of a social order in line with what utopian narratives implicate, the following part of this study will present a discussion of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's literary utopia, *Herland* in terms of how her text disrupts the hegemonic discourse and challenges the traditionally adopted essentialist assumptions about gender, femininity and the intricate power relations. The ultimate aim will then be to demonstrate the need to ultimately adopt a non-binary approach in order to facilitate the formation of a world order that may be free from the restrictive boundaries of the existing discursive practices.

Discussion: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*

Gilman's literary utopia, *Herland* has become one of the primary literary works of utopian literature, as it is now part of the relevant canon. It is also acknowledged as one of the most significant works of feminist utopian fiction, especially when taking the date of its publication into account. Prior to the textual discussion, it will be useful to give brief biographical information about Charlotte Perkins Gilman and to present brief plot summary. Gilman was born in 1860 and committed suicide in 1935. Her most-known short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" got published in 1892. She wrote *Women and Economics* in 1898 and, spoke her mind about the need for women to gain economic independence, as her aim was "to explore the avenues through which women could expand their economic opportunities in a market society, thereby becoming liberated from their customary familial subjection" (Sheth and Prash, 1996, p. 324). In this regard, Gilman, who is "a thinker far ahead of her time" reflects "an ideology of expansive, supportive, strong femininity" in *Herland* (Lant, 1990, p. 292).

Gilman's novella, *Herland* portrays an alternative world order, in which the male-dominated world is juxtaposed with the isolated society, run solely by women, which can be labelled as *utopian* depending on the point of view (emphasis added). The story is narrated by a male character, Van Jennings, who shares his impressions of the utopian land of women, Herland. Three male characters, namely Vandyck Jennings, Terry O. Nicholson and Jeff Margrave, all American, go on an expedition by plane, somewhere in South America, to find out about the mysterious land called Herland, which consists entirely of women, as they are thrilled at the idea of such a country. They are surprised to come across a civilized place with well-developed towns, excelling in agriculture and cultivation because Herland is "an agricultural heaven (with every aspect of the physical surroundings planned in order to produce foodstuff, even the forests)" (Hausman, 1998, p. 496).

This leads them to believe in the existence of men somewhere, as it is, for them, impossible to have such a level of civilization without men. In this imaginary social order, men have been absent for about 2000 years due to wars, diseases and finally volcanic eruptions. Since then, a matriarchal world order consisting of women, who "support each other in a gynocentric community far away from the institution of male-centered panopticism" has been established (Chang, 2010, p. 324). Three female characters, namely Elladir, Celis and Alima become the external factors for the men to find their city. They are welcome by a group of women called the Colonels; however, the male characters' unfriendly manners lead them to be anesthetized. Even though they expect severe punishment, they are subject to highly hospitable and friendly treatment.

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They are taught the Herlanders' language and learn about their culture, history, and other characteristic features of their social structure. In return, they also teach the Herlanders about how their world order is structured. Over time, Jeff marries Celis, Terry marries Alima, and Van marries Ellador. The novella comes to an end with Terry expelled upon his concerted attempts to rape Alima. Van, Ellador and Terry decide to return to America, and promise not to reveal the exact location of Herland until Ellador comes back with a complete report of outside world: "... that you promise not in any way to betray the location of this country until permission---after Ellidor's return" (Gilman, 1915, p. 124).

The plot summary of the text draws closer attention to the gender issue by making us imagine yet another social order that might be totally unfamiliar to us. Through the portrayal of intersections of numerous pivotal factors, it makes us question the reliability and validity of numerous normative categories and traditionally adopted binaries. This can eventually lead to the subversion of the traditional patriarchal hegemonic discourse, as Gilman's text does defy against the patriarchal norms and categories that attribute various physical, emotional and other properties to the male and the female, creating categories of superiority and inferiority. Although the social order reverses the binary and reflects women as more powerful, athletic, successful and braver, the novella has further implications to think beyond this reversal in a world in which "[m]eaning no longer coincides with experience" (Johnson-Bogart, 1992, p. 87).

What the text represents and discusses can be deemed as an efficient step to a potential non-binary approach rather than strict binaries, which do not allow us to see "the multiple, oscillating imbricated forms of power" such as men/women, human/nonhuman, human/animal, urban/rural, ruler/ruled, strong/weak, culture/nature, and many other binaries (Gill and Pires, 2019, p. 291). How these binaries are incessantly questioned, refuted, and reconstructed throughout the text based on the relationships between Van, Jeff and Terry and the female characters is illustrated and exemplified in the course of the narrative, one example of which can be observed in the conversation between Terry and Alima:

> "I don't understand," she said quite sweetly. "Are the women in your country so weak that they could not carry such a thing as that?
>
> "It's a convention," he said. "We assume that motherhood is a sufficient burden---that man should carry all the others."
>
> ...
>
> "Don't be so literal," Terry begged lazily. "Why aren't you willing to be worshipped and waited on? We like to do it."
>
> "You don't like to have us do it to you," she answered (Gilman, 1915, p. 79).

Their conversations, behaviors, and critical questions, such as the one above, demonstrate the fabricated nature of categories, which many people take for granted or believe they are natural.

Gilman hereby also questions the notions of normality and abnormality by challenging what is normal and what is not normal within the context of gender roles, social duties and the constitutive elements of a social order and its texture, drawing closer attention to the fact that gender reality is "performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (Butler, 1988, p. 527). This is best exemplified in the a priori expectations of the male characters who initially find in themselves the right to "master" the women of Herland, just like the typical excuse of a colonizer who believes that a colonized person needs to be tamed and "civilized" (emphasis added).

Each male character is functional in that each of them shows different reactions to the new social order run by women highlighting how the hegemonic discourse shapes them. Their judgment of the new order reflects and projects a critique of the patriarchal world order they live in, about which they feel embarrassed: "None of us was willing to tell the women of Herland about the evils of our own beloved land." (Gilman, 1915: 100). This, thus, reveals the significance of discourse in shaping people in a Foucauldian sense because discourses are "ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning" (Weedon, 1987, p. 134).

Thus, discourse molds Van, Jeff, and Terry, who "accidentally stumble upon . . . women's utopia" (Lloyd, 1998, p. 104). However, when the hegemonic discourse is challenged and subverted by displaying the other side of the coin, the formerly adopted discourse loses its validity and yet another discourse is constructed, which discloses the instrumental role discourse plays in their Weltanschauung, or their world view. The influence of the hegemonic discourse especially becomes perceivable and clear to the reader, as the three male characters have quite a hard time in accepting the *new normal* since it is almost totally against what they are used to (emphasis added). They insist on the existence of men in such a developed and civilized place: "There were cities, too; that I insisted. It looked—well, it looked like any other country---a civilized one, I mean" because civilization and development are, for them, their defining characteristics (Gilman, 1915, p. 9). This is especially evident when they explore well-built towns and carefully-cultivated land to produce the maximum amount of food, which leads them to conjecture further that there must be men to protect them.

Terry, who is a perfect example of how the intersection of race with other axes plays a significant role in social inclusion or exclusion, turns out to be the racist and most misogynistic character of all in the text. He does not want to believe that women can create such a successful and peaceful, utopian world order. In his excluding and discriminating women, the intersection of race and ethnicity with gender plays a role since he regards himself superior. He, therefore, states: "Of course there are men," said Terry. "Come on, let's find them." (Gilman, 1915, p. 10). Terry's acceptance of possibilities does not take place completely even at the end of the narrative, but, he also goes through a gradual metaphorical transformation in the course of events. His insistence on the superiority of men causes serious problems on his behalf. The sentence "Must be men here. Hark," can be given as the main defining sentence for Terry. His existing notions of a woman, a wife, a mother and men-women relationships are juxtaposed with the so-called oppositional, defying approach of the Herlanders, which demonstrates how Gilman deconstructs "the idea of women being unequal to men and blur[s] the line between male and female as binary oppositions" by "placing women as the hegemonic gender and men as the gendered other" (Bowers, 2018, p. 1321).

The male characters' expectations from women show a stark difference to those in Herland. In this regard, Terry's remarks in his conversation with the teachers as to the world order in America reveal the perception of suppressed women in his world, which does not find acceptance in the land of the Herlanders:

> "We want so much to know-you have the whole world to tell of us, and we have only our little hand! And there are two of you—the two sexes—to love and help one another. It must be a rich and wonderful world. Tell us—what is the work of the world, that men do—which we have not here?"

> "Oh, everything," Terry said grandly. "The men do everything, with us." He squared his broad shoulders and lifted his chest. "We do not allow our women to work. Women are loved---idolized---honored—kept in home to care for the children" (Gilman, 1915, p. 52).

The hegemonic discourse shaping Terry implants the sense of inferiority and superiority in that it associates women with weakness, inferiority, passivity, domesticity, the domestic circle, and domestic responsibilities such as rearing children, cooking, cleaning and obeying what the husband wants, whereas men are associated with power, especially physical power, activism, superiority, courage, reproduction, and mastering. It excludes women socially, whereas men find total inclusion in the male dominated world order Terry and the other male characters live in. This later on becomes highly problematic when that dominant discourse does not work out in the land of Herland, as it is exempt from the suppressive atmosphere and pressure of that discourse.

When compared with the mainstream discourse in the male characters' world, the hegemonic discourse in Herland places more value on peace, equality, collective identity, societal values, openness, curiosity: "Theirs was a civilization in which the initial difficulties had long since been overcome. The untroubled peace, the unmeasured plenty, the steady health, the large good will and smooth management which ordered everything, left nothing to overcome" (Gilman, 1915, p. 84). This land seems highly *utopian*, yet one may also question the idealness or the feasibility of such an order since every utopia may have dystopian undertones depending on the perspective, which also demonstrates how the lines between utopia and dystopia are also blurred, just like the other social categories (emphasis added). In this regard, the discourse of women in Herland acts like a counterreaction to the discourse into which Van, Jeff and Terry were born. In this new order, the male character must "learn to accept the righteousness of the Herlanders' ideals before he can contribute his much-desired diversity" because otherwise they are not welcome into this world, highlighting the performative aspect of gender in a Butlerian sense (Lothian, 2018, p. 44).

To give some concrete examples from the text that can show how the patriarchal discourse reflected through the three characters is challenged and undermined under the strong influence of intersecting factors, the women of Herland do not understand what the male characters expect from them, especially when it comes to the notion of sexuality: "They were not each choosing a lover; they hadn't the faintest idea of love—sex-love" (Gilman, 1915, p. 76). The male characters want to have sexual intercourse with women, which is referred to as the "high tide of supreme emotion" but it is met with resistance and opposition (Gilman, 1915, p. 108). Except Celis, they make it clear that they would not have sex unless they really want to or unless it is to have a child. Their society instead values motherhood a lot, which they experience through parthenogenesis, that is virgin birth: "By motherhood they were born and by motherhood they lived--- life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood" (Gilman, 1915, p. 51). Although Gilman does grant women a voice and to speak their mind, she portrays motherhood, which symbolizes "the fulfillment of their being, an honor allowed only the most revered among them, and the culminating instance of all the highest aspirations of civilization," as the most sacred duty of the Herlanders (Peyser, 1992, p. 14). Yet, this causes another problem since it still contributes to the functioning of dichotomous thinking, illustrating how the intersection of other axes with gender can play a role in discrimination.

Although Gilman illustrates motherhood as a divine gift, her text still struggles to highlight an oppositional approach to the patriarchal order, especially within the context of her time and asked for "greater equity between males and females in both private and public spheres" and "transformed social relations" in order to "transform conditions for women" (Connell, 1995, p. 21). To give an example from the text, the Herlander women do not have a sense of femininity, being a wife or sexuality, as there exists parthenogenic reproduction in their land, which becomes a source of conflict when the three male characters marry the three female characters.

RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi 2020.21 (Aralık)/ 667

Charlotte Perkins Gilman'ın *Herland* eserinde bir kesişimsel okuma denemesi: İkili karşıtlıkları sorgulamak / E. Atasoy (660-668. s.)

Since these women are not used to being controlled or suppressed just because they are women, they always ask whether a situation one of the male characters touches on also applies to men or not, or they express their surprise at the expectations of the male characters: "'What I cannot understand,' she pursued carefully 'is your preservation of such a very ancient state of mind. This patriarchal idea you tell me is thousand years old?'" (Gilman, 1915, p. 97). In Van's conversation with Ellador, she also accentuates the significance of free will and her own decision rather than imposed behavior:

> If I thought it was really right and necessary, I could perhaps bring myself to it, for your sake, dear; but I do not want to---not at all. You would not have a mere submission, would you? That is not the kind of high romantic love you spoke of, surely? It is a pity, of course, that you should have to adjust your highly specialized faculties to your unspecialized ones" (Gilman, 1915, pp. 109-110).

These reactions of the Herlandian women also become the reason why Terry ultimately calls them "neuters, epicene, bloodless, sexless creatures" (Gilman, 1915, p. 113). These lines explicitly show how it is all a matter of perspective and discourse while judging situations, which leads one to question the reliable nature of the hegemonic discourse and binary categories.

Conclusion

Gilman's literary utopia, *Herland* deals with numerous challenging issues such as gender, power relationships, racism, essentialist categorizations, and the significance of discourse in shaping people and opinions by picturing a world order, run merely by women. In this world order, the hegemonic discourse and binary oppositions are disrupted in the course of the three male characters, Van, Jeff, and Terry's encounter and juxtaposition with the land of Herland. Through this encounter, Gilman shows us how it is all a matter of discourse and discursive practices that create social categories and construct different binaries. Although Gilman reverses the binary and portrays women as superior and better, her text is still powerful in questioning the nature of binary oppositions that may impose various policies of exclusion and inclusion based on power relations and various intersecting factors.

What she projected was highly revolutionary for her time in that she granted women a textual space to speak their minds and to show alternative possibilities, which makes her literary utopia valuable. By projecting such a utopian land like Herland, Gilman also challenges the ingrained nature and structure of certain assumptions about gender by putting three male characters into such a utopian society. Inspired by what Gilman's literary utopia implies and communicates, I want to conclude my paper by suggesting that we need to work towards dismantling these dichotomies and getting rid of such discursive practices to initiate a new way of looking at ourselves and at our surrounding so that a potential non-binary future may be waiting for us.

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