

## From Herland to Gilead: Framing Women Fertility in Dystopian and Utopian Fiction

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### Abstract

There is something structurally amiss in a culture that only values women for her capacity to bear a child. It is reflected in misrepresentations in literature that confined women to stereotypes that creates an endless room for debate particularly in post-humanist literature. This paper addresses how female fertility is framed in the texts of Margaret Atwood- *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* (dystopian) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman- *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland* (utopian). Using transitivity analysis, it aims to examine representation and roles attached to feminine fertility, to discourse fertility in utopian and dystopian texts, and evaluate the politics of the female body in relation to fertility and reproduction. Clearly, Atwood's dystopian fiction critically examined the oppressive and utilitarian view towards the female body which contrasted with Gilman's utopic body autonomy. It is revealed that a sense of feminine liberty is associated to utopian fiction contrary to body bondage depicted in dystopian texts which has deeply elaborated a politicized view towards the future of the post female body and women in general.

**Key words:** *dystopia, utopia, ecofeminism, fertility, transitivity analysis, post-human*

### A. Introduction

Women have always been the focus of various studies in different disciplines such as gender studies, developmental studies, linguistics, and literature, particularly in post-humanist literature where male dominance is evident (Williamson, 2016). There is no denying the uncertainty of what tomorrow holds, but it is not for women one thing for sure. The discussion towards how gender is tackled in post-humanist writings has constantly been challenged time by time (Pearson, 2010). It cannot be denied that there is a denying of power and space for feminist narratives to change the landscape of such literary genre (Sha et al., 2014). There is an undeniable threat to what the post-human world projects in terms of gender roles and representation written and narrativized for readership (Zarrinjooee, 2017). This is where the work comes in, changing the realities and myths that have been imprinted as norms that we choose to believe in.

When we think about post-humanist literature, we think of feminine subversion. Chitando (2011) opines that majority of existing literature created a default image and role assigned to women tells us an unfavorable future for women. Little work has been done on analyzing fictional works by female authors from this perspective. Most of the studies are focused on the portrayal of women in fiction by male authors who view the world from a masculine point of view, and their work is characterized by patriarchal power. Post-human writings are too patriarchal and impose a sweeping idea that there is no future for women (Jameson, 2000). The problem of directly associating post-human literature with "masculine" is the gap this study wanted to address. This paper is a response to debunk the idea of an anti-feminist future by using texts that dismantled the patriarchy in the post-humanist narratives.

Focusing on the issue of women's reproductive freedom- her right to fertility- this paper will embark on understanding how fertility is framed in feminist utopian and dystopian texts.

This is evident in Fitch (2015) who examines how media influences the representation of women which she juxtaposes classic dystopian text into a contemporary dystopian trilogy. She implicated that issues attached to women representations are reflections of the author's view on her societal experience that regards her disposition as a woman which in the case of Atwood becomes socially relevant by the time she wrote *Handmaid's Tale*. She further added that some issues could no longer be that relevant in a different milieu.

These representations are extended into a larger frame wherein it established tropes and stereotypes that women are expected (by default) to occupy particularly in films. Maher (2008) echoes this problem in representation which confines women as limited to reproduction and procreation. This contributes to what we see as ideological knowledge where the need of tweaking these narratives is of most relevant.

In a similar sense, Vasalo et. al (2017) delved into the idea of representation by focusing on the discourse of infertility in science fiction as a feminist issue. It was clear that both fertility and reproduction play key roles in defining gender, and the control of one's fertility as a central theme in feminist manifestos, as pregnancy and child rearing are often used to subordinate women. It was further remarked that the notion of productive power gives rise to the subjects over whom, and through whom, power structures enmesh us all-both in fictional and in actual worlds.

The relationship between post-human literature and reproductive equality was forwarded by Kendal (2018) that utopias aimed at improving gender equality in human reproduction provide some useful suggestions for overcoming current sexism and pregnancy-based discrimination. This is contrary to as what dystopia aims to reflect.

In addition, reproduction and fertility in utopian and dystopian contexts is further elaborated in an article by Gilbert (2018) who focuses on the lack of agency of dystopian and utopian texts in terms of the discourse of fertility. The reason why these representations flourished predominantly is due to the fact the science fiction is a male-dominated genre. She added that in post-human texts, men are depicted as the abuser of power that in an opposite sense, when this power assigned to women the future would be less corruptible and that feminine fertility and reproduction could be more of a right than a biological assignment.

Furthermore, the gap on only seeing women as reproductive machines in post-humanist writings will be central in this paper; thus, it will use such attributes to evaluate women's future in feminist texts. Utilizing texts that have revolutionized feminism in the post-humanist genre, this paper discourses on fertility as a feminist and an anti-feminist concept through the light of the texts provided for evaluation which will shed light on impartially seeing women's value in the utopian and dystopian writings.

## B. Methods

This paper attempts to reconcile both literary and linguistic approaches by drawing on the theory of feminist stylistics and analyzing the formalist elements presented in each text. This paper used a qualitative descriptive design to compliment the paper's focus on the discourse of post-feminine fertility. To align the paper's focal point of analysis, which revolves around the plight of the text's protagonist, the paper employed transitivity analysis. Halliday (2004) defines this approach as linguistic nuances that the writer (through his character) wanted to express about his real-world experience. Dijk (2008) adds that analyzing the action-process of discourse is one of the ways in doing CDA. Method of transitivity choices is suitable for the type of analysis which researcher wants to conduct for this study. It has enabled the researcher to answer the

questions. Transitivity choices analyze the activity and passivity of male and female characters in any text.

The study made use of texts by Atwood and Gilman. Both writers are considered household names in both the genre of post-humanist feminist writings. To provide a clear distinction between the utopian and dystopian concepts of feminine fertility, two (2) novels of each author were considered. For utopian texts, Charlotte Perkin Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and *With Her in Ourland* (1916), while for Dystopian, Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and *The Testaments* (2019). All of the two books were extensions of the previous and are considered a sequel of the texts, so the issue of seeing it as a single text will be considered considering that there were no changes in the parts and aspects that were regarded vital for the analysis. Unlike many other sequels, they still have the same characters and are consistent with the thematic focus it had with the first book. The genre was specifically given attention in the selection of the texts and should be feminist texts written by females to address the goal of the gap.

## C. Findings and Discussion

### 1. *Reproduction Discourse*

The borderline on seeing woman as biological has always been an issue to the field of feminist writings claiming that a woman's value is only subjected to her biological role-bearing a child. In 'Myth and Reality,' the ninth chapter of Simone de Beauvoir's seminal feminist manifesto "The Second Sex", it is posited that women are mythologized in literature and larger society as the 'Other' and the antithesis of the normative male. While men are represented as the natural state of humanity, women are characterized as opposite and therefore inferior. The idea of a "woman," Beauvoir suggests, is a social construct which is contrary to how women are viewed in terms of their biological make up. In this discussion women roles are identified in relation to fertility which explains classifying them as the biological (dystopia) and social (utopia) woman.

#### a. Self-Reproduction or Parthenogenesis in *Herland*

Gilman's approach to female fertility in *Herland* has to do with her regard to ecofeminism which links women and gender as connected as a form of liberation from oppression imposed by patriarchal society. Fertility is viewed from a natural perspective rather than being biological. Women are represented in terms of seeing fertility and reproduction as a privilege and not as an obligation. *Herland's* women are almost religious when it comes to motherhood. The women of *Herland's* extraordinary capacity to birth children on their own has led them to see motherhood as the primary component of their beings—their ultimate obligation and honor. Women's capacity to bear children without engaging in sexual activity with a man was promoted as a desexualized concept. Desexualized idea towards reproduction was practiced- women's ability to bear a child without having sexual intercourse with a man.

The *Herland* system of reproduction challenged the idea of presenting and packaging women as mothers. It emphasizes womanhood as a social construct rather than a biological one. With rare exceptions, each woman in *Herland* only has one kid and does not have to raise it alone. Children are instead raised by professionals since their education and nurture are far too vital for society as a whole to be left in the hands of private individuals. Every child has a country of moms, and every woman has millions of items to adore. Children are not things, and motherhood is not merely incidental to a woman's sexual existence, according to Gilman, in a culture that truly appreciates mothers and children.

Terry, one of the male visitors and an outlander who has set foot in Herland, is strongly imposing his western patriarchal views towards female roles which are in stark contrast with how Herland regards fertility and being a woman in general. The visitor's view towards Herland women is less feminine from the definition of women they had back at their land. Terry is the embodiment of patriarchy, who imposes his idea that every woman in Herland is not feminine at all because they do not embody the ideal image and attributes of what it means to be a woman. Gilman challenged the idea of dualism and stereotypes assigned to women. By expanding the roles of women, she created a place where women can resist the roles imposed by the traditional-patriarchal society. The citizens of Herland have an athletic shape, less attractive compared to the delicate yet voluptuous Western ideal. And their athleticism is deemed "unnatural" by the visiting misogynists, yet their muscles are built through organic means. The country was built by warrior women and then grew into a peaceful nation filled with women strong enough to assert themselves.

In this regard, Gilman is urging women with the still-contemporary message not to suppress their true power and not to submit to the pressures of the patriarchy. A woman can achieve true autonomy and control by freeing herself and unlocking her untapped physical potential. Fertility and reproduction are represented with a sense of independence by not having to depend on men. Consequently, it dismantled common stereotypical representations of women towards mutual reproduction by giving independence on how to utilize feminine fertility and viewing one's self- devoid of the systemic constructs pre-assigned for them to occupy.

#### b. Coercive Reproduction in *Handmaid's Tale*

The *Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian feminist science-fiction novel about the different methods in which the female protagonists – the handmaids – try resistance in a male-dominated society. There are two types of sexual coercion: institutionalized and internalized. The reader is immersed in a world where the system of oppression has become so entrenched that its excesses are almost imperceptible to the characters. Atwood utilizes the position of a first-person narrator/protagonist who is one of the handmaids. Termed as ritualized sex, they are forced to engage in sexual intercourse with a commander to conceive a child as part of their role as handmaids. Gilead's women have no choice. Handmaids to the Commanders, in particular, are incapable to legally consent in an intercourse. "The Ceremony" takes place when Offred's menstrual cycle reaches its most fertile stage. Assisted by Serena, the Commander's wife, Offred is engaged into the most dissatisfying and highly impersonal sex. Offred describes "The Ceremony" in this way:

*"I do not say making love, because this is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (pp.94)*

Offred claims that becoming a handmaid is "what she chose," but The Ceremony's complete and utter lack of autonomy and permission makes it difficult not to consider this is an assault scenario. After all, you can't say yes unless you can say no. Because Offred cannot accept that she is a victim among the most aggressive sexual tyranny possible – whether or not to bear a child – the sexual compulsion has become internalized.

It was also clearly stated in *The Testaments*, through one of the narrators, Agnes, that she would sooner commit suicide than become a handmaid. Daisy's character, who acknowledged in her testament that suicide was the most sensible way to avoid a far more awful death, exemplifies patriarchal sexual tyranny of women. She believes that dying herself is a better option than forcibly reproducing or having coercive intercourse with captain Judd. Female role

classification was also visible in the literature, in addition to the forceful reproduction used by handmaids.

In Atwood's dystopian novel, women are classified according to their fertility value, which determines their role in Gilead society. In order to survive and coexist in the puritan and orthodox Gilead, they must assume this role. Women are redefined and depicted in terms of their reproduction value, which is represented in colors that figuratively characterize their role. The classification was only based on roles that were related to fertility. Women are divided into two categories: fertile and infertile, according on the function they will perform in Gilead's society.

## 2. Representation of Fertility

Fertility is a central issue in both texts, which the authors wanted to amplify through the voice of the characters they used. What does it mean to be a fertile woman in a utopian and dystopian context? Does being fertile mean power and infertile being powerless? The perspective that both genres provide in the post-sexual reproductive future discourse delineates the notion of feminine fertility in the post-human world being a choice and a commodity. Thus, central to the discussion on how fertility can humanize and dehumanize a woman in Herland and Gilead contexts.

### a. Herland's Fertility as a Choice

In Herland, Gilman portrays fertility as a luxury in contrast to how society regards women as a source of overpopulation. In Herland, fertility in relation to parenting is a shared experience, with women having complete control over how they use their fertility. If a woman wanted to have more than one child, she was only allowed to have one, which contrasts with how Terry expected women to bear. It also resonated with how Van refers to the patriarchal definition of 'mother,' saying that:

*"we call "a mother" completely wrapped up in her pink bundle of fascinating babyhood, and taking but the faintest theoretic interest in anyone else's bundle" (pp. 58-59).*

According to patriarchy, mothers should bring up their children in private homes, and Terry supposes that *"world work's was different— that had to be done by men, and required the competitive element"* (pp. 52). He insisted that having only one child makes a woman a lesser woman. Women in Herland are taught to control their fertility in response to overpopulation which becomes a collective feature since motherhood is a collective task.

Fertility in Herland is associated with motherhood; since they do not have any men, they bear a child through parthenogenetic women. When the population increases, they try to control it by introducing a new perception of motherhood. Gilman introduces the new conception of motherhood as shown in the text, "before a child comes to one of us, there is a period of utter exaltation—the whole being is uplifted and filled with a concentrated desire for that child" (pp. 60). Young women who do not have a child voluntarily defer it, but those young women who have a child try to engage in the most active work, and Somel describes that *"[she] would solace her longing by the direct care and service of the babies we already had"* (pp. 60). Herlandian women control their desire and motivation to have children through thought and taking care of other children. For Herlanders, as the narrator describes, "the longed-for motherhood was not only a personal joy, but a nation's hope [...] with the devoted love and care of all the surviving population, grew up as a holy sisterhood, their whole ardent youth looking forward to their great office" (p. 49). In Gilman's definition of feminine, fertility does not carry the baggage and responsibility of being a mother, which is how patriarchal society expects women to be. She



redefines and tailors fertility as a "privilege" than a "responsibility," which is in stark contrast to how dystopian contexts associate fertility with women.

b. Gilead's Commodification of Fertility

Our society has always been patriarchal. This is clearly evident in dystopian texts, where it projects past practices and amplifies them in future contexts. Commodifying women based on their fertility and ability to bear and become surrogates have always been practiced. Our reactions to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Testaments* reflect how comfortable our culture is with the commodification of female fertility. This commodification is part of our history, and literature is still practiced now.

Atwood's novel, in which the protagonist is subjected to depersonalizing, utilitarian sex as a kind of stand-in for her master's infertile wife, her sexuality commodified not for pleasure but for reproduction, in a politically mandated surrogate motherhood which entails the utter erasure of the woman as anything other than a reproductive function. The obligation to procreate is assigned, and they have to be fertile as much as possible for fertility is power. Women in Gilead are valued for their fertility, but that doesn't mean they are more valuable than men- they still remain inferior being gendered.

According to one law in Gilead:

*"There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful, and women are barren, that's the new law"* (pp. 61).

The absolute lack of acknowledgment that men can be sterile demonstrates Gilead's oppression of women. Whatever the case may be, the women will always bear the brunt of the blame. The oppressor has complete power over reality, allowing the oppressed to be silenced.

3. *The Female Body*

The posthumanist regard for the female body has always been a heated topic and still is a never-ending discussion. Body politics is a significant issue in women's representation in posthumanist writings. It can be attested with Haraway's contradiction towards the traditional construct of gender as addressed in her essay "Cyborg Manifesto," which rejects the limitations imposed on the conventional view towards gender. This speaks a lot as to how the female body was represented in the selected texts. There is no denying that both provide a stark contrast as to how the female body was discoursed in relation to fertility. Fertility plays a pivotal role that determines the worth of a female's body which directs the issue of ownership. There is a saying, "your body, your choice," but does not always translate in some contexts where post-sexual oppression is practiced. Hence, in a world where the future is unknown, a woman's body might be hers or might be the nation's.

a. Her Property: Autonomy in Female's Body in Gilman's Utopia

Freedom is central to how the female body is regarded in Herland. As a woman, you control your own body, your property. It is a utopia for women where motherhood and womanhood are redefined from a point where men are excluded; it indeed liberates women without constraints. The dualism of ideas is presented through the characters of the visitors (Van, Jeff, and Terry) and highlander women (Ellador, Alima, and Celis). Terry, the sexist among the three of them, insisted that once a woman marries, her body is entirely no longer hers since she has made an oath of being married and being in one body with her husband. This has posed many questions to the women of Herland that directs the Western world's segregation and stratification of gender: it seems that keeping women in a home ("like a slave," a citizen of

Herland suggests) benefits the perpetuation of the patriarchy more than it helps the woman. As Herland depicts, denying women what they are fully capable of, the idea that gender is more than a social performance is internalized in Western women.

There is no denying that Gilman's is more utopic than Atwood in terms of body politics. It brings to the issue of Gilman's portrayal of feminine sexuality, which is an entirely constructed concept aimed to please men. Even once the women of Herland marry, they are still depicted as desexualized. It lacks inclusivity since her characters are white, young progressive women, which denies the plight of the other women minorities. It cannot be helped that feminism is a complex vacuum, and you cannot please everyone with what you write. You are not the book that you read; this makes sense that Gilman is not critiquing but somewhat reimagines an alternate reality where there is an absence of misogyny.

It is clear that Gilman's depiction of the female body is more anchored on a spiritual and social lens than being biological. It creates a difference since a woman's body is sacred. It gives life, and it nurtures life. It humanizes women who, in return, desexualize them. It appeals to be more utopic than being dehumanized, which is the case of Gilead women. Thus, Gilman's approach to body politics might not be ideal, but it is much better than being denied ownership of something you own.

b. Nation's Property: Utilitarian View on Female's Body in Atwood's Dystopia

Atwood's representation of the female body emphasizes the fertile women or handmaids who are coerced into a life of forced servitude to produce children. The body is thought to be submissive and uncontrollable by the person who owns it. This concept is based on the Biblical account of Rachel and Bilhah, in which a handmaid, Bilhah, carries children for Rachel's husband, Jacob when she is unable to do so herself.

The Handmaids are subjected to systemic oppression as a result of society's requirement that they engage in the Ceremony, an immoral procreative ceremony. The Handmaids have no choice but to take part in this Ceremony. Offred mentions that she was given the option of becoming a Handmaid, but that her other options were death or exile to the Colonies of Unwomen. Gilead's society believes the Handmaids chose their status when, in actuality, they only choose to survive. The society utilizes the claim that being a Handmaid is a vocation to compel the Handmaids to engage in this humiliating rite. Gilead uses this technicality to oppress the Handmaids in a systematic way.

Women in Gilead are treated as cows in dairy farms. This is magnified through how little girls are reared to become handmaids in the future. They are fed with the right food, educated with the words of the bible, and denied of earthly things that make them a sinner. In the Testaments, one of the entries of the handmaids implies a strong idea that they no longer own their bodies. The nation of Gilead possesses every fertile body that these women have, even the infertile. The body politics in Atwood's texts deny women their right towards full control of their bodies. A woman's body is her tool to survive in a place where utilitarianism is propagated. The Handmaids are dehumanized by Gilead's civilization, which separates their physicality from their distinct personalities. The Handmaids are revered in Gilead society, but not as precious persons, but rather as the sanctified reproductive system. The Handmaids are prized in society for their prolific ovaries. Another form of systemic oppression is the Handmaids' separation from their humanity. Fertility is strongly considered a nation's property, which removes one's right from her own fertility and body. It is safe to say that Atwood glimpses us into a world where it sucks to be a woman and being infertile at the same time.

## D. Conclusion

In the light of the discussion and analysis done in the selected texts, the following conclusions were drawn:

This paper aims to frame the discourse of feminine fertility in feminist utopian and dystopian texts. Works of Gilman and Atwood were selected since both are precursors of the genre and paved the way for feminist writings to occupy a space in the post-humanist literary landscape. The paper addresses the gap in the lesser insights about post-human feminist texts written by women that correspond to male-dominated post-humanist writings. Thus, female authors were selected in order to capture the authentic nuances of writing about a gendered character by a gendered author. Through comparative-transitivity analysis, it is clear that both authors provided a different future for women in terms of tackling the themes of post-sexual fertility and reproduction.

It is evident that both texts manifest what Ruppert (1989) considers to be the function of feminist utopic writings. Atwood and Gilman challenged existing social values, undermined existing norms, and transformed existing social beliefs attached to being a woman. Gilman's *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*, reconstructed and approached motherhood and fertility as a social construct which asserts how Beauvoir (1949) in her book "Second Sex" on representing women as round female characters rather than objects of the narrative, which are very representational on how *Herlanders* are- strong, intelligent and independent women. This is in contrast to how Atwood has reflected women's roles as categorically determined on their fertility as depicted in *The Handmaids Tale* and *The Testaments*. Similar to how Lefanu (1995) considered utopia as the liberator of women and dystopia as bondage, women in dystopian Gilead are in bondage to the nation's oppressive view towards women as docile bodies who are only valued by their ability to bear a child. Each of these texts deals, in some manner, with the oppression of women and the control of women's bodies by a political entity. Removing control over reproductive and sexual decisions from the hands of individual women, even for the most utopian of reasons, opens the door to all manner of repressive tactics (Gaard, 1993). Women's bodies become commodities to be used by the state in an efficient fashion to produce the desired population. Women are relegated to the position of sex providers in order to maintain their existence.

Fertility can either feminize a woman or desexualize her from being a woman. The issue in these texts boils down to the depiction of a perfect utopia and a believably- alarming dystopia. Utopian representation of post-sexual reproduction does not always warrant fertility to be a feminist tool. The discourse will always go down to who is in power. Gilman's liberation of women through autonomy infertility can also be dystopic in another way. Feminizing women does not always mean humanizing them. Desexualizing women also is considered oppression since liberty is not really absolute. This demarcates how dystopia could be utopic since it projects a realistic future that warns the concerned populace to take action. This is congruent to how Barr (2000) writes that dystopian texts are more than stories- they are warnings of potential futures too devastating to contemplate. These stories are warnings of the possibilities of technology, the uses of eugenics, and the control of human flesh. They are utopian tales that urge us to consider how we will view the future and ask difficult questions about the policies of the present.

There is something fundamentally amiss in a culture that values a woman only for her capacity to give birth but denies her the prestige and ritual power due to this capacity, and this wrongness is reflected in polluted ecosystems fractured relationships. Therefore, through challenging the conventions of post-humanist writings, it is the goal of feminist writers to become the creators rather than objects of their stories. Atwood's depiction of assault to reproductive rights and Gilman's educative approach to utopian imagination of fertility



representational of critical examination and alternative paradigms of the kind of future awaiting women.

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