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Women's Worlds in the Novels of Kandukuri and Gilman

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Abstract: In her article "Women's Worlds in the Novels of Kandukuri and Gilman" Suneetha Rani discusses Veeresalingam Kandukuri's *Satyaraja Poorvadesayatralu* (Satyaraja's Travel to the Distant Lands) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland.* While the novels were published in two different contexts — one in pre-independence India and the other in pre-World War I in the U.S., one in Telugu and the other in English, one by a man and the other by a woman — there is an interesting connecting thread that brings them together. Both were satires on the contemporary male chauvinistic world. While the Telugu novel pleads for a better treatment of upper-caste Indian women, the US-American novel looks hopefully towards an ideal world where men do not exist. Rani discusses the strengths and weaknesses of both novels while at the same time her analysis suggests the relevance of both authors' work today.

Suneetha RANI

Women's Worlds in the Novels of Kandukuri and Gilman

In this article I discuss gender and women's issues in the novels of two authors in two different cultural and linguistic loci: Veeresalingam Kandukuri (1848-1919) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). While the novels were published in two different contexts — one in pre-independence India and the other in pre-World War I in the U.S., one in Telugu and the other in English, one by a man and the other by a woman — there is an interesting connecting thread that brings them together. Both were satires on the contemporary male chauvinistic world. While the Telugu novel pleads for a better treatment of upper-caste Indian women, the US-American novel looks hopefully towards an ideal world where men do not exist. Kandukuri's works probably constitute the best example to show how deeply Telugu literature has been influenced by English literature. Most of his works are either adaptations of or at least inspired by British writers. Apart from writing several books on various issues of social reform, he translated Shakespeare's plays such as *The Comedy of Errors* (literal and prose adaptation), *The Merchant of Venice*, Sheridan's plays such as *The Rivals* (1894) and *Duenna* (1885), and *Aesop's Fables* (1893).

Kandukuri explained that he had started translating Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* but because he thought a foreign story may not interest Telugu readers, he adapted it instead for writing a novel he titled *Rajasekhara Charitramu* (The Story of Rajasekhara) (1878). Among other reasons, Kandukuri's objective was to counter superstitions in Telugu society. *Rajasekhara Charitramu* was once again translated into English as *The Fortune's Wheel* (1887) and published in London. He also translated Goldsmith's poem "The Traveller" into Telugu as "Pathtika Vilasam" (1892) and William Cowper's *John Gilpin* (1875). It is not only fiction, drama, and poetry that he brought from English to Telugu but also Thomas Henry Huxley's book on physiology. Kandukuri not only borrowed from the colonial literary tradition, for instance the genre of the novel, but also emphasized its importance. Similarly, he tried to create the image of a modern woman based on the model of British women. For example, his autobiography *Satyasanjeevani* (1887) (The Rejuvenator Called Truth) was meant for a women readership. Importantly, he published a number of texts from English literature in his journal *Satihitabodhini* (The One That Preaches Good to the Wives) (1883), a journal intended for women's awareness. He also published a collection of the life stories of "ideal women" such as Joan of Arc, Mary Carpenter, Elizabeth Frye, and others. And he borrowed from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* for his *Satyaraja Poorvadesayatralu* (1891) (Satyaraja's Travel to the Distant Lands). Similar to Kandukuri's fascination with English literature, both writers and readers of Telugu literature preferred to have texts of imagined ideal worlds which contrasted with actuality. We find many examples of such writings, especially in the genres of either travelogues or imaginary travelogues or essays comparing contemporary society with other societies, sometimes real and sometimes imaginary, for instance Barrister Parvateesam by Mokkapati Narasimhasastri who in his introduction to *Barrister Parvateesam* discusses in detail readers' interest in imaginary worlds. And Kandukuri's *Satyaraja* is similar where he tried to convince his readers that it was a travelogue while at the same time he suggested that it is a work of fiction. In his introduction to the novel, Kandukuri narrates how readers wrote to him enquiring about the imaginary world he has described and expressing interest to go to that world.

Compared to men's travelogues and adventure stories, women's travelogues are few in Telugu literature. Despite the obstacles they encountered, women did write travelogues, sometimes about imaginary lands. For example, there is Bandaru Achhamamba's (1847-1904) 1902 short story *Dhanatrayodasi* (A Woman's Wealth; the title refers to the first day of the five-day Diwali festival considered auspicious to purchase precious metals) where Achhamamba refers to "Ice London" as a country dominated by women. And in her article "Strividya yokka prabhavam" ("The Influence of Women's Education") Achhamamba wrote this: "Men and woman equally get education in the island of Ice London. Political rights are equally given to men and women there … All are women in the education department there … there are no prisons and police since women look after protection of people there. No army. No courts. Isn't all this the result of women's education? While there are such instances in other countries, some people in our country are still debating whether women should be educated or not" (Achhamamba qtd. in Satyavati 6; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are

mine). The quotation suggests that the Achhamamba is not talking about an ideal society based on absolute equality, but about a society where women dominate the crucial departments like education and police and hence a no-crime society. This comes close to the imaginative world of Gilman, in which she portrays an ideal society without crime and disturbance (on Gilman, see, e.g., Davis; Davis and Kinght; Gough; Gubar; Long). Interestingly, Achhamamba's imaginative world parallels with Kandukuri's work as the latter often referred to debates about education at the time. A further example of early feminist literature is by Bengali feminist Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905) where the young queen decides to subvert the patriarchal system and reform society. The outcome is similar to Kandukuri's world, but devoid of humor, thus emphasizing the seriousness of the concept. Moreover, in *Sultana's Dream* it is the woman who narrates her dream. Although it is a dream, it is not the narration of a visitor who is taken to observe the women's world, like it is in the case of Kandukuri and Gilman.

Kandukuri and Gilman emphasize that their narratives are recollected from memory and are not spontaneous and both confess that either they have no evidence or have lost the evidence and add that it would have been a different story if the evidence was available. While Gilman's protagonist goes in search of exploration and adventure, Kandukuri's protagonist, frustrated with failure in life, goes in search of better societies. Gilman's explorers, the protagonist Van and his two friends, reach the island by boat. The women's world there is isolated but it is situated on earth while Kandukuri's protagonist reaches the country miraculously with the help of a sage and slides into the underworld in an unconscious state and returns in a similar manner. Gilman's utopia is narrated in a serious tone with occasional humor which is almost forced thus revealing the writer's disgust with the existing world. On the other hand, Kandukuri's novel is full of humor, satire, and sarcasm, not only in tone and dialogue but also in its theme. He created a world where everything is topsy-turvy compared to the contemporary world. It is full of exaggeration and ridicule and hence the narrator himself becomes suspect, thus weakening the purpose of the text. It merely remains one more text that creates impossible and impractical worlds to evoke laughter. It portrays the feminist tenor as an extreme feature of the utopian worlds in a ridiculing manner. For instance, in this world, the nose of the widower is cut off so that he does not attract women. This reminds us of the world of nineteenth-century India, where widows' heads were shaved.

On the other hand, Gilman seems to have built a women's utopia logically and systematically where women construct and manage everything without the help of men. Women come together in making and taking decisions and women in this world are a binary of quarrelling women in contrast to the women in the real world, as well as the dystopian world of Kandukuri. His world has men but in subordinate positions and Gilman's world is completely devoid of men. While the protagonist Satyaraja is depicted as the "other" individual in a matriarchal and matrilineal world, Van and his friends are depicted as "other" species in a world of men of no relevance. While both worlds are depicted happy and comfortable in themselves, in Gilman's world — which has had no men for two thousand years — looks forward to the company of men and attempts a natural selection of suitable male companions when the three adventurers step into the country. This attempt at natural selection is connected to the natural selection of women when their country was devastated, isolated, and left without men. When most of the men were killed in wars and buried under the newly formed ridge that stood like a wall between them and the outside world, slaves rose in revolt and in turn the women rose against slaves. Not only did they learn to live without men, who were their companions, but also learned to continue reproduction which became the centre of their life and their country. Gilman depicts close and intimate woman bonding by referring to a sisterhood which leads to harmony among them and makes them better mothers: "You see, they had had no wars. They had had no kings, and no priests, and no aristocracies. They were sisters, and as they grew, they grew together-not by competition, but by united action" (*Herland* 40). Rape is absent as they live like asexual beings. They are so strong physically and mentally that they "will" to have children. While only roles are reversed in Kandukuri's world, Gilman's world itself is reconstructed.

Interestingly, Gilman's world of women does not present a chosen seclusion but a forced one and this differs from Kandukuri's world where women — disgusted with male chauvinism — decide to reverse the roles. Kandukuri's novel mirrors a revolution which begins in the form of a revolt suggesting that the writer was hinting at a social movement which could change the hierarchy and

establish a new system in pre-independence Indian society. Although the novel focuses on similar qualities of women, it ultimately leads to companionship with men with a hope for companionship and reproduction. Again, the two novels' worlds are narrated by men who are outsiders. Whatever we get to hear about and from the other worlds, we hear through the outsider narrators. This results in a judgmental capacity and reliability to outsiders and the women's worlds remain only narrated. In Kandukuri's novel thoughts, ideas, opinions, reactions, and creation are all from men's point of view and women are depicted as mere subjects visited and narrated.

While Satyaraja is given a subordinate role as a man in an oppressive society, the three explorers in Gilman's novel are not treated as subordinates but are suspected and kept under constant vigil by the women to study in order to become good companions to establish a male-female world they had lost thousands of years ago. In fact they are treated as if the women have never seen any men at all. Here is a statement made by one of the characters, which reveals how gender consciousness is absent in Gilman's new world of women: "Jeff continued thoughtful. 'All the same, there's something funny about it,' he urged. 'It isn't just that we don't see any men — but we don't see any signs of them. The — the — reaction of these women is different from any that I've ever met. 'There's something in what you say, Jeff,' I agreed. 'There is a different — atmosphere.' 'They don't seem to notice our being men,' he went on. 'They treat us — well — just as they do one another. It's as if our being men was a minor incident'" (20). It is likely that this is a strategy chosen by Gilman is to show how men from this world fail to understand and analyze women of the envisioned world. Readers are also kept under this impression until the women start speaking and explaining their emotions. The women notice the biological difference between the visitors and themselves and they scrutinize the men explorers as their prospective companions hoping that this companionship could bring back "normalcy" in their world. They experiment with the explorers whom they look at as tools found by chance. In contrast, Kandukuri's world is based on gender consciousness, all systems are re-structured, all scriptures are re-written, and all are relationships re-visited.

Gilman has written extensively about the role, status, and responsibilities of mothers in society in her works such as *Women and Economics*. Kandukuri, too, emphasizes the importance of the educated, wise, and capable new women within the framework of family. In his conceptualization of a reformed society, the Indian woman was supposed to take the ideal of the British woman in order to improve herself with the help of education. But all this was to make women better housewives so that they could make and keep better homes. While his "modern" ideas of women's education function with the purpose of shaping an ideal new woman, this image has always been that of an upper caste family woman. Kandukuri adopts ideas from the West also in his *Satyavati Charitramu* (1883) (The Story of Satyavati) a story about an educated woman. His heroine is thoughtful, thought-provoking, sensible, and compassionate, and she does not believe in superstitions. She contributes to the health, happiness, and peace of the family and in the process she protests against established beliefs. Narayana, Satyavati's husband, says, "In fact, it is a terrible disease to make the delivered women to fast. They get absolutely tired in delivery. Moreover, if they have no food they cannot get up due to weakness. Sometimes even diseases can occur because of this fasting. Have you not seen whites, how strong the nursing mothers are and how they move around from the day after the delivery?" (*Satyavati* 180). On the other hand, Gilman's world is centered on motherhood. Motherhood is sacred for women in that society and is considered the only fulfillment for their life as it is important for them to populate their world and to continue their "race." They make several changes in their small island to make it habitable for the increasing population. In fact, this concentration on motherhood almost turns into idealization and glorification and seems to be suggesting that but for the man as her companion, the woman will make her children the preoccupation and destiny of her life: "Here was Mother Earth, bearing fruit. All that they ate was fruit of motherhood, from seed or egg or their product. By motherhood they were born and by motherhood they lived — life was, to them, just the long cycle of motherhood" (*Satyavati* 40). This glorification of motherhood as the sole purpose and destination of women's life in Gilman's world of women might have been intended to sing the achievements of women. But, at the same time, it also minimizes the scope of a woman's life and restricts her movement. While it is true that Gilman's world confines women to motherhood alone, it is also true that the existence of fatherless children in *Herland* is a negation of respectability of legitimately fathered children. Legitimacy of children, which is a guiding factor in most societies in the

contemporary world, is not an issue in *Herland* at all. Children in *Herland* are children of the country. Thus, a major conflict/obsession is eliminated from this society which in turn leads to peace and contentment.

A further dimension of Kandukuri and Gilman's women is that they have their own languages. Thus, apart from creating social, geographical, and cultural utopias, they create linguistic utopias. Their language also adds to their quality of a civilized race, especially in the case of *Herland*: "It was not hard to speak, smooth and pleasant to the ear, and so easy to read and write that I marveled at it. They had an absolutely phonetic system, the whole thing was scientific as Esperanto yet bore all the marks of an old and rich civilization" (21). Although there is an attempt on the part of the people in these worlds to learn the language of visitors, it is the explorers who learn the language of the local worlds. It is also true that Kandukuri uses certain derogatory terms while referring to their language and that their language is deciphered and learnt for manipulation by the men which is like an intrusion into the linguistic arena of the world that gives a key to the treasure of knowledge possessed by the local cultures. While the visitors are made to learn the local language and knowledge systems and the locals are also made to learn the visitors' language and culture, the visitors start "educating" them as there was a need to do so. This once again brings the issue of colonizer stepping in the name of learning but ending up teaching the colonized. This teaching is not an access to the colonizer's knowledge systems but proves colonial power and trains the locals as tools of colonization. Interestingly, the utopias attempt to reform and alter male chauvinistic societies for better families and communities while at the same time they reiterate other kinds of hegemonic orders like class, race, caste, and processes of "civilization."

The concept of civilization appears in several places in the two novels and the agenda and the ideology of the writers regarding "uncivilized worlds and peoples" are revealed in the narratives often. For instance, in *Herland* the three male explorers are accompanied by a "savage" who gives them information about and takes them towards the women's country. In Gilman's world there is male explorer/narrator who ventures into a women's world and thereby employs a male eye to view an all-woman world: "there is no doubt in my mind that these people were of Aryan stock, and were once in contact with the best civilization of the world. They were 'white', but somewhat darker than our northern races because of their constant exposure to sun and air" (35). This suggests that race is an important concept for Gilman. The best civilization is associated with the Aryan stock and of course interpreted differently in the Western and Indian contexts, respectively. But one cannot miss the connotation of a groomed and weeded race in the "Aryan stock": grooming is the most important aspect in Gilman's world because it is sometimes in contrast to and sometimes in accordance with the conditioning of the world around depicted.

Alys Eve Weinbaum suggests that if Gilman's fiction is read through the lens of her non-fiction it becomes evident that both forms of writing were driven by fears of racial mixing. Further, Weinbaum argues that Gilman grounds her nationalism in reproductive politics and establishes a contrast between US-American mothers and Herlandian mothers. While the male adventurers try to link up with "perfect" women of "civilized Aryan descent," the isolated women also test these possible companions. Although one of them is rejected as an incompatible and unsuitable male, it cannot be ignored that the writer has already established the difference between the "savage" guide and the civilized explorers. This bias also comes out in the history of the land as well, which says that when all men in the country were lost, slaves rose in revolt and the women suppressed it successfully. This establishes two major facts about Gilman's "civilized" land, namely that it had a strong system of slavery in its glorious days and that these women had to suppress the slave revolt in order to establish an ideal world of peace and order. This presents a typical picture of a feudal country which witnesses the advent of colonization, as well when the men step in, who in turn can take *Herland* towards the lost glory.

Weinbaum's argument also brings to mind Susan S. Lanser's argument about racial overtones in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* in that the short story reveals Gilman's anxiety about the "yellow peril." One cannot forget the fact that Gilman was branded "insane" and from her experiences of solitude and isolation of "insanity" came her short story. While she refuted the charges made against her with regard to *The Yellow Wallpaper* that it will drive women towards madness, she argued that it was written — to the contrary — to prevent women from drifting into insanity. Gilman's "A Suggestion

on the Negro Problem" surprises us because, as Black and Native writers in the postcolonial societies are arguing, her writings reveal her abundant gender consciousness, but they fail to express human consciousness. Filled with racial bias, Gilman ignores Black and Native women and expresses contempt for Blacks and immigrants. In a similar manner, Kandukuri is a conscious upper caste man and upper castes of India, especially Brahmins are always associated with Aryan stock. Like typical upper caste men, both the writer and his protagonist create a world judged by their own values and standards. The protagonist Satyaraja makes Brahmanical statements when he refers to *mala* food and clothes on the train journey, which reveal the social rank of the protagonist. It is difficult to decipher whether Kandukuri is ridiculing Satyaraja or supporting him as they express different views and because the novel has a sarcastic and satirical tone: Satyaraja talks against English education whereas Kandukuri was an ardent admirer of it.

Kandukuri's and Gilman's novels remind us of captive narratives but with a difference: in each at least one of the "other" lands is ideal and perfect unlike in captive narratives where they are depicted as savage lands with uncivilized and harmful people. Also, men in these two novels look disempowered as they are held captive, imprisoned, and controlled. On the other hand, ironically, they are the empowered compared to the local inhabitants as they narrate the "other" world. The natives of these countries, like Natives in colonized countries remain mere subjects. Kandukuri's utopia has social reformers who argue in favor of liberty and emancipation of men and he portrays this dimension which refer us to his attempts towards social reform in Telugu culture. In this context, he faced opposition as a social reformer and was criticized because he was concerned with only Brahmin women while he does not seem to be talking about other women as such in terms of reform especially by Dalit women writers such as Jupaka Subhadra, Challapalli Swarooparani, and Gogu Syamala in many of their writings. It is important to realize that while lower caste women are ignored by Kandukuri, courtesans are condemned by him and that while in his view family women of the Brahmin caste needed to be emancipated from social evils, society needed to be emancipated from the clutches of the greedy, selfish, and immoral women who functioned as prostitutes. He chose the role models for brahmin women carefully: it could be writers, rulers, or extraordinary women and there is always an attempt to develop images which would women of the Brahmin caste within the limitations of sanctioned liberties and duties.

Kandukuri's views about women's education and progress — whether in his fiction or in his non-fiction — are as restricted and restricting as possible. Further, Kandukuri condemns Muddupalani, an eighteenth-century Telugu poet who wrote the erotic narrative poem *Rādhikā-sāntvanam* (Appeasing Radha). In his entry on Muddupalani in his *Andhra Kavula Charitramu* (History of Telugu Poets), Kandukuri refers to her as "that woman" throughout. While he accepts her scholarship in music, literature, and other fields and that the flaws seen in her writings can be also seen in men's writings, he condemns her work by saying that most parts of *Rādhikā-sāntvanam* are not to be read or spoken about by women because of the erotic content of the text. When Kandukuri discusses Kummari Molla's poetry in his *Andhra Kavula Charitramu*, he relegates her existence to irrelevance just like he does Muddupalani and with regard to Tarigonda Vengamamba, apart from praising her for her poetic excellence, he focuses on her social status as a Brahmin woman and compares her with Muddupalani this way: "Unlike the prostitute Muddupalani, she does not say unmentionable things in the name of descriptions of romance. Her descriptions befit a family woman and she proclaims that she dislikes even to utter romantic lines" (*Andhra* 948). Thus, Kandukuri's fiction must be read in the context of limited scope.

On the other hand, women in *Herland* express their interest in the visitors' land and they do not lose their balance and patience even when the explorers make adverse observations. This way, Gilman succeeds in portraying women characters who can smile at the naivety of the explorers because the women are sure about their achievements and knowledge systems. As they appear to be learning about the world outside, they educate the explorers about their land, as well as about the outside world:

"Have you no kind of life where it is possible?" asked Zava. "Why, yes-some low forms, of course." "How low-or how high, rather?" "Well-there are some rather high forms of insect life in which it occurs. Parthenogenesis, we call it-that means virgin birth." "She could not follow him." "Birth, we know, of course; but what is virgin?" "Terry looked uncomfortable, but Jeff met the question quite calmly. "Among mating animals, the term virgin is applied to

the female who has not mated," he answered. "Oh, I see. And does it apply to the male also? Or is there a different term for him?" He passed this over rather hurriedly, saying that the same term would apply, but was seldom used. "No?" she said. "But one cannot mate without the other surely. Is not each then-virgin-before mating? And, tell me, have you any forms of life in which there is birth from a father only?" "I know of none," he answered, and I inquired seriously. "You ask us to believe that for two thousand years there have been only women here, and only girl babies born?" "Exactly," answered Somel, nodding gravely. "Of course we know that among other animals it is not so, that there are fathers as well as mothers; and we see that you are fathers, that you come from a people who are of both kinds. We have been waiting, you see, for you to be able to speak freely with us, and teach us about your country and the rest of the world. You know so much, you see, and we know only our own land." (31-32)

Gilman educates us about levels of knowledge and the boundaries of these two groups in their encounters. While the wisdom of the new found land is reflected on, the naivety of the civilized land is also focused on. It shows how an "uninhibited" land can speak openly about the nature and the natural and also how an all-women culture understands the surroundings on one hand and how the "inhibited" cultures interpret even the natural as unnatural and consider it a taboo even to talk about certain things on the other hand. The narrators try to tell the readers how they could understand the limited world easily while the citizens of the women's land had to be explained and convinced about the unlimited world, hinting at the enormity and vastness of the outside world. But, the readers, with the help of the writer, understand exactly the opposite.

In conclusion, the similarities in the texts I analyze highlight gender issues, but so with a bias towards race and caste that raises interesting issues such as reforms for sidelining or condemning people who belong to "other" parts of society. The two utopian lands narrated unveil the othering of prejudices of the respective writers in spite of their best efforts to argue in favor of women. Apart from their traces of colonialist exploration, these can function as examples for the racist/casteist feminist writing that "the other" writers such as Natives, Blacks and Dalits have been raising their voice against. Also, they raise crucial questions which can become directions for further research, such as why do utopias and dystopias "other" already "othered" parts of society sections more, while Kandukuri and Gilman appear to narrate against the people who have othered them or their people? If marginalized parts of society like Natives, Blacks, Dalits, etc., were to write a utopia, what would it be like?

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