

Finding 'Herland': Utopian Windows in Sabyn Javeri's Selected Fiction

Muhammad Ali

Lecturer, Institute of English Language and Literature, GC University, Lahore, Pakistan, m.ali_aquarius85@yahoo.com

Sameer Ahmed

Assistant Professor, Institute of English Language and Literature, GC University, Lahore, Pakistan, sameer@gcu.edu.pk

Muhammad Salman Bhatti

Associate Professor, Department of Urdu, University of Education, Lahore msalman@ue.edu.pk

Abstract

In recent reviews of Sabyn Javeri's fiction, the author has been criticised for offering too little to feminist emancipatory discourses in Pakistan. Javeri has been accused of creating narratives where the resistance of female protagonists is circumscribed, and sexually divergent characters are realigned with patriarchal social norms. In line with feminist utopian scholarship, which claims that authors sometimes create bridges that lead to nowhere but intervene in, disrupt and perhaps even sporadically upend patriarchal structures, this study relocates Javeri's fiction in the tradition of the feminist utopian narrative. In its reading of Javeri's short fiction, specifically 'A World without Men' and 'The Urge', we claim that the author's 'deviant' female characters seek out and create transient spaces for temporary self-actualisation beyond traditional patriarchal society. The alternative space created

can be labelled feminist utopia or ‘Herland’— a term from Charlotte Perkins Gilman seminal work — referring to a world inhabited only by women. Even if the protagonists retreat to the traditional heteronormative sphere of relations in Pakistani society, Javeri gives them a temporary window to create worlds in which they, like the women of Herland, do not need men as counterparts to complete them. In this way, Javeri’s images are charged with creative/ subversive potential.

Keywords: Feminist utopia, Gender, Orientation, Herland, Sabyn Javeri

Introduction

Sabyn Javeri is a Pakistani English novelist and short story writer whose works centre around Pakistani women and their limitations in an intensely patriarchal society. This study focuses on two short stories: ‘A World without Men’ and ‘The Urge’, both published in the 2019 anthology titled *Hijabistan*. Both revolve around the struggles of women in unconventional relationships. Despite finding space to explore their latent inclinations and having experienced short-lived happiness, the protagonists are sucked back into the heteronormative sphere of patriarchy. The leading question for this study, therefore, is how can the seemingly patriarchy-(re)affirming fiction of Javeri be read as subversive? In other words, wherein lies the potential of ‘A World without Men’ and ‘The Urge’ to create alternative spaces for the female protagonists?

As a relatively recent publication, academic research on *Hijabistan* is sparse. There have been reviews in leading newspapers, though, which have taken the author to task for her presumed failure to imagine more fulfilling possibilities for her protagonists. Lamat R. Hasan, in her review of the book for *The Hindustan Times*, expresses disappointment at Javeri’s heroines’ failure to attain their desired outcomes. Hasan (2019, n. pag.) believes ‘the protagonists come across as helpless, instead of in

control of their lives'. An important review for *The Hindu* expresses a similar concern about Javeri, seeing her feminism as 'confined and feeble' (Suresh 2019, n. pag.). Another critique titled 'The Question of Woman's Identity and Hijab: A Critical Study of Sabyñ Javeri's "The Urge"', sees little more than a mimetic reflection of 'violence and suppression of women' in the anthology (Jatt et al. 2021, 6427). Suhasini Patni, in her review of *Hijabistan* for *Scroll.in*, believes Javeri reveals but does not question misogyny in her fiction (Patni 2019, n. pag.).

This study challenges the prevailing reception of Javeri's work in the South Asian literati, as far as it finds expression in leading literary reviews. We argue that since Sabyñ Javeri's characters explore their latent desires, they become inhabitants, albeit interim ones, of 'Herland', an idealistic and utopian world inspired by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, where women do not have to depend on men to complete themselves. Situating Javeri's fiction in the tradition of feminist utopia, we demonstrate how the leading ladies in the texts resist, revoke and upend (even if temporarily) dominant norms and expectations thrust on them. In 'A World without Men', one protagonist explores and acknowledges her unconventional sexuality, and continues her quest for more fulfilling relationships beyond patriarchal morality and rules of sexual conduct. In 'The Urge', the contentious issue of infanticide can be problematised to shift critical focus on the wider social matrix that is conducive to acts of extreme violence. In both cases, Javeri's fiction is testimony to the creative potential of women to create alternative spaces.

Feminist utopias

Bartkowski (1989) offers a comprehensive review of the feminist utopia. Such narratives portray an ideal society that is based on principles of equality and the dismantling of patriarchal structures. In other words, a feminist utopia is an alternative vision. It is a world where women are empowered, valued, and free from gender-based oppression.

In most feminist utopias, gender roles are reimagined (if not turned on their head). This reimagining of possibilities creates alternative space(s). Since women are not limited to traditional roles (caregivers or sexual objects), the focus is on the well-being and autonomy of all individuals. While the visions may not be realistic in the traditional sense, and are usually provisional, their very creation and dissemination serve to challenge traditional hierarchies and binaries. Most works falling in this category, notes Bartkowski, explore themes such as reproductive freedom, sexual liberation, the reimagining of family structures, and the eradication of violence. In this way, they critique existing social systems.

Gilman's *Herland* is often taken as the prototype for feminist literary utopias. It portrays an all-female society that is free from the influence of men and patriarchal structures. The women in *Herland* take decisions collectively and thrive in a society that is based on cooperation rather than competition and the structuring of power as in the hierarchical male world. Doing so, *Herland* highlights the importance of women's autonomy and independence, and their potential to work collectively. Finally, Gilman addresses the issue of reproduction through the use of parthenogenesis and eugenics, demonstrating that womanhood cannot be reduced to childbirth and child rearing. Even though Gilman has been criticised for being Eurocentric (see Paravantes 2009), *Herland* shows that women can create and sustain a functioning society that is not based on patriarchal principles (Hausman 1998).

In her analysis of *Herland*, Bartkowski (1989, 23-45) has listed salient attributes of feminist utopias modelled on Gilman's work. The application of such an approach to the text expands its conceptual potential so that 'Herland' becomes a powerful metaphor for alternative space(s). As a concept, 'Herland' is a society composed entirely of women, and thus offers the potential for women to thrive independently. There is no hierarchy or competition, and hence greater margin for cooperation. At the same time, women are capable and autonomous individuals, and

choose to collaborate for general welfare. The women of 'Herland' value education and do not focus solely on domestic or familial responsibilities. Reproduction occurs through parthenogenesis, which means that women can reproduce without men, thus removing the dependence on the male for the continuation of the species. Simultaneously, motherhood is honoured and child-rearing is communal. Women are not reduced to being mothers and nurturers only. This results in a peaceful and harmonious society.

It is important to note that the trope of a women-only society has remained just that — a trope employed in feminist writings and sometimes visual media. Even though 'Herland' becomes a reality in Gilman's fiction, Javeri's women only ever live such an existence temporarily. Moreover, their female liaisons are secret, sometimes accompanied by guilt but exceedingly by pleasure, and have to be abandoned in the face of threat to personal security. The result is a return to heterosexual marriage. While this does not present the promise of utopia, and accordingly, 'Herland' is never accomplished, it would be harsh to dismiss Javeri's vision as defeatist, and oppressive patriarchy as ultimately successful (even if that does seem to be the case).

As Majury (2002, 125-40) argues, feminist utopian visions act as alternatives to current social conditions by offering imaginative and visionary possibilities for a world that challenges and dismantles patriarchal power structures. The point to note is that the alternative space offered in such utopian visions is not always literal and permanent. The success of the visions lies in their ability to present alternative ways of thinking about social organisation, and not in creating happy endings where such visions have been achieved. By envisioning a world without gender-based violence, inequality, and oppression, feminist utopias inspire and motivate individuals and communities to work towards creating a more just and equitable society. If Javeri's work encourages its readers to think about the alternative lives her protagonists *could*

have spent, the narrative is successful in creating an image of a different possibility, even if that alternate world cannot be sustained.

Furthermore, as feminist utopian visions critique and challenge the existing social, legal, and political systems that perpetuate gender inequality and violence against women, they offer alternative ways of thinking about justice, welfare and governance. Javeri's work, we claim, makes us think about violence and inequality; about justice, autonomy, individual growth and collective welfare. Therefore, even if the two stories taken in this study do not end on a happy note, they are not defeatist, as some reviewers have suggested.

Analysis

In 'A World without Men', we are introduced to the anonymous lady narrator and her husband who live in the UK. We learn that the narrator's husband decides to go on a six-month vacation without her. This is the first hint that the couple's marriage is unstable, if not unconsummated. Their year-long relationship, or lack of one thereof, has told them that they cannot come to terms with each other. Consequently, the husband decides to 'rediscover himself' (Javeri 2019, 77). There is use of deliberate ambiguity here; we might permit ourselves to imagine that the husband too is exploring his sexuality. But what is unequivocal is the narrator's exploration of the sexual options available to her.

It is interesting to note that the narrator's dull and boring life comes to an end only after the man with whom she was probably forcefully associated goes on the trip. This is when a female student enters her life. Saira is a veiled girl from Pakistan who initially lies that she belongs to Iran, but things fall into place once their relation goes beyond academic confines with 'lingering touches, the accidental bumping and the sitting too closely' (Javeri 2019, 90).

Over time, we learn that Saira is more open to her inclinations. She is the one who initiates contact with the narrator. The narrator, on the other hand, remains frigid, at

least initially. While Saira is young, single and lives with her parents, the narrator has been in a seemingly suffocating heterosexual relationship. The encounters between the two women grow intense once the husband is out of the picture. We also see the narrator going out of her way to order books for Saira and then asks her if she would 'like to go for a coffee' (Javeri 2019, 84).

It seems safe to speculate that if the narrator's husband had not left her, she would neither have shifted to Leicester nor would have taken two jobs to support herself. It is this series of steps, this chain of events that bring the narrator and her student, Saira, together. Javeri thus creates a world in which a woman discovers and expends her latent potential which only comes to the fore once there is complete absence of a male figure in her life. Furthermore, it is the move to Leicester and a new setting which allows the narrator to form a liaison with another woman. Both the characters may not be entirely in 'Herland', but they have come close to it as the land of men has been abandoned, if only provisionally.

At the same time, we must note that it takes a lot of courage for the story's narrator to come to terms with and admit the fact that she is attracted to Saira. In Gilman too, it takes the female protagonists some time to turn their land into a land of women with a wider and deeper understanding and appreciation of society (Gilman 1915, n. pag.).

Before being separated from her husband, the narrator and Saira's relation remains confined to friendship, incorporating mostly conversations 'via texts' (Javeri 2019, 89). It is after the divorce that the two become more intimate. The narrator recalls the first of such moments in the following words: 'I kept thinking about the softness of the encounter, the unexpectedness of it all. But I suppose what was really bothering me was that I was considering the possibility of it.' (Javeri 2019, 93) Her feelings for Saira intensify following her admission that her marriage 'was a disaster' (Javeri 2019, 93). The narrator seems to have chanced upon a discovery of her latent hidden sexuality. It

is probably the reason why she rebukes Saira for agreeing to an arranged marriage in Pakistan: 'I think you really need to do some serious thinking. Please just promise me you won't rush into anything' (Javeri 2019, 98). On the other hand, Saira, pulled in opposite directions, suffers a mental breakdown: 'I've got feelings for other women. I'm...I'm a fucking freak. That's why I want to get married. I want an arranged marriage. Back in Pakistan' (Javeri 2019, 97).

It is after this that Saira leaves for Pakistan after giving her teacher her last, warm hug, smelling 'of wet earth, of the vibrant green grass after the rains, of talcum powder and the smells of freshly baked bread' (Javeri 2019, 99). The narrator, at this point, reflects on the liaison she has had with Saira: 'Of all the goodbyes I had to face recently, I knew this one was the most painful. And also the most necessary' (Javeri 2019, 99).

Javeri's critics believe that with Saira's return to Pakistan (a metaphor for hetero-normative orthodoxy), tradition and patriarchy are restored. Since Saira herself interprets her short-lived dalliance in pathological terms, the digression is brought to its 'logical' end, inasmuch as it was a deviation from the norm. Deviant, destructive, non-conformist behaviour has been checked. However, the story does not end with both characters returning to the fold of hetero-normative orthodoxy. For one, the narrator does not renounce what she felt for Saira upon the latter's departure. It can be inferred that she continues in her quest for a more fulfilling, equalitarian relationship. Furthermore, both characters acknowledge the authenticity of their feelings for each other. The brevity of the relationship does not detract from its authenticity. Finally, even though Saira returns to Pakistan for the express purpose of marriage, we might imagine a different future for her. As Paul Valery is quoted to have said: 'A poem's never finished, only abandoned' (Flynn 2013, n. pag.). So too, perhaps, is Saira's tale.

The main characters in 'The Urge' are more daring than the ladies in 'A World without Men'. 'The Urge' is the story of a girl who befriends her young aunt. The

relationship gradually goes beyond kinship. The two women find comfort, joy and fulfilment in each other's company. An interesting device employed by the writer is the use of the full-body covering or *abaya*. The mother gives her thirteen-year-old daughter a 'patterned head scarf' and a 'long, black, cloak-like garment' to wear preferably, at all times (Javeri 2019, 14). The uncle throws away any cosmetics he finds as the work of the devil (Javeri 2019, 18). In all probability, the mother and uncle view women's visibility (in general) as objectifying and reducing them to sexual objects, rather than acknowledging their agency and contributions in other aspects of society. In this respect, if the *abaya* can be seen to be both protective and emancipatory, as noted by Nilufer (2000, 465-91), the problem arises from its mandatory nature. The women in the story do not take up the *abaya* willingly, but the family elders mandate it for them.

However, the girl and her aunt discover that they can wear what they want, and adorn their bodies in whatever way they like under the enforced total body-covering: 'We cut off the sleeves of our old shirts and pretended to be wearing western dresses under our *abayas*. We giggled at the thought that nobody knew how immodestly we were dressed underneath' (Javeri 2019, 22).

A clandestine world is created within the recesses of the *abaya* where social conventions and moral codes are subverted. In this way, the body becomes a site of resistance as the women seem to have (temporarily) gained control over their own bodies, sexuality, and reproductive choices. Seminal to the creation of such a liberatory space in 'The Urge' is the body. Among the early scholars to stress the link between the body and the development of the self was Hocking (1928). Hocking suggested that the self is an internal portrait constructed by our understanding of who we are. This, in turn, is shaped by our experiences. The experiences of the women in 'The Urge' lead them to recognise their own potential in defining themselves in opposition to social norms.

While the vision is brief, it emphasises the importance of creating spaces where all individuals can thrive and fulfil their potential. The incognito space created by the *abaya* subverts some of the motives of family members/ society who expect the protagonists to cover themselves head to toe. The space that has been created allows the women to explore, albeit briefly, the spectrum of possibilities beyond heteronormative liaisons. Catriona (2002) links efforts in establishing such spaces with utopian ideals of emancipation. Women wanting to create alternative sexual cultures underscore productive self-sufficiency, privacy, and safety.

Speaking in metaphorical terms then, the world which the women in 'The Urge' create is 'Herland'; a space where women find relief from patriarchal values and gain agency over their bodies. While such spaces are hidden and private, they offer potential for politicisation and transformation. The creation of a private space is therefore the first step in the direction of a public action linked with wider ideals of justice and more egalitarian societies. As Catriona (2002) notes, communities that believe in such ideals in the US state of Oregon are also influenced by socialist and Marxist ideas. Many of these communities advocate for communal living arrangements, shared resources, and criticise capitalism and its impact on women's lives. The creation of safe spaces is thus considered as part of a wider movement for social transformation.

In the case of the two Pakistani women in 'The Urge', they are found out and given a brutal thrashing by the family. It happens after the ladies are inspired by a Bollywood song to sport a one-shouldered dress, and then caress each other. Just like Saira, who in 'A World without Men', is compelled to return to Pakistan to marry a man, the narrator is married off to a local shopkeeper. Later on, when she gives birth to a daughter, she strangles her with her own hands. This horrendous act of infanticide stems ostensibly from her belief that the girl will not be allowed to be herself in society.

Filicide is an extreme step. Readers might speculate that the girl in the 'The Urge' suffers from postpartum depression, or even psychosis. However, we would like to postulate that in having an unhappily married woman kill her child, Javeri highlights the importance of considering sociocultural factors in analysing such cases. As Meyer et alia. (2001, 2) point out, infanticide is 'not a random, unpredictable crime. Instead, it is deeply embedded in and is a reflection of the societies in which it occurs.' As mothers who kill their own children are labelled mentally unstable or malevolently destructive, Meyer et alia (2001, 68-94) argue that such dichotomies oversimplify the issue. In this context, we believe that the author underscores the complex factors that may have led to mental health conditions resulting in filicide in 'The Urge'. In other words, such acts cannot be reduced simply to revenge, frustration or madness without acknowledging the role of the family, society, and patriarchy in creating conditions supportive of extreme violence. It is the role of the mother, the uncle, and the broader society that is brought under scrutiny in 'The Urge'.

Conclusion

Disagreeing with popular perception that sees Sabyñ Javeri's fiction as inadequately feminist, this study has explored the subversive potential of Javeri's short stories 'A World without Men' and 'The Urge'. We have challenged the criticism that Javeri's work is defeatist, arguing that her narratives present alternative spaces or windows of opportunity for her female protagonists to explore their latent desires and challenge traditional hierarchies.

By examining the concept of feminist utopias, particularly drawing inspiration from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (both as a concept and metaphor), we have highlighted the reimagining of gender roles, sexual liberation, and the questioning of traditional family structures as integral elements of feminist utopias. Javeri's stories align with these attributes, emphasising the importance of autonomy and cooperation among women.

In analysing 'A World without Men', the study has emphasised the narrator's relationship with Saira, which creates a temporary alternative space where the protagonist can thrive and fulfil her potential. Similarly, in 'The Urge', we have explored how the characters subvert social conventions through their use of *abayas*, creating a clandestine world where they gain control over their bodies.

Additionally, the study delves into the sociocultural factors contributing to extreme acts of violence, as witnessed in the portrayal of infanticide in 'The Urge'. It highlights the complex interplay of family, society, and patriarchy in creating conditions conducive to such violent acts, urging readers to critically examine the broader societal context.

At the same time, we notice and consider that both stories depict the eventual reabsorption of the female characters into the constraints of patriarchy, highlighting the harsh realities faced by women in Pakistani society. But the point to note is that this portrayal does not diminish the subversive nature of Javeri's work. Rather, it provides glimpses of alternative possibilities for women within patriarchal societies. Through the exploration of their latent desires and experiences of temporary liberation, the female protagonists in 'A World without Men' and 'The Urge' become agents of change, questioning and subverting the patriarchal structures that seek to confine them. They become denizens of Herland, even if temporary ones.

Works Cited List

1. Bartkowski, Frances. *Feminist Utopias*. University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1989.
2. Chang, Li-Wen. "Economics, evolution, and feminism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian fiction." *Women's Studies* 39 (2010): 319–348. [DOI: 10.1080/00497871003661711]
3. Eichler, Margrit, Neysmith, Susan M., and Larkin, Judy. "Introduction: Feminist utopias, necessary visions." In: *Feminist Utopias: Re-visioning Our Futures*, edited by Margrit Eichler, Susan M. Neysmith, and Judy Larkin. Inanna Publications: Toronto and Education, Inc, 2002, pp. 9–26.
4. Flynn, Daniel. "A book is never finished, only abandoned." *Writing.ie*. <https://www.writing.ie/guest-blogs/a-book-is-never-finished-only-abandoned/>. 6 March 2013.
5. Gole, Nilüfer. "The forbidden modern: Civilization and veiling." In: *Feminism and the Body*, edited by Londa Schiebinger. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000, pp. 465–491.
6. Hausman, Blake L. "Sex before gender: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the evolutionary paradigm of utopia." *Feminist Studies* 24 (1998): 488–510. [DOI: 10.2307/3178576]
7. Hocking, William Ernest. *The Self: Its Body and Freedom*. Yale University Press: New Haven, USA, 1928.
8. Johnson-Bogart, Karen. "The utopian imagination of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Reconstruction of meaning in 'Herland'." *Pacific Coast Philology* 27 (1992): 85–92. [DOI: 10.2307/1316715]
9. Lloyd, Barbara. "Feminism, utopian and scientific: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the prison of the familiar." *American Studies* 39 (1998): 93–113.
10. Majury, Diana. "What were we thinking? Two decades of law reform on the issue of violence against women." In: *Feminist Utopias: Re-visioning Our Futures*, edited by Margrit Eichler, Susan M. Neysmith, and Judy Larkin. Inanna Publications: Toronto and Education, Inc, 2002, pp. 125–140.

11. Meyer, Cheryl L., Oberman, Michelle, and White, Katherine. *Mothers Who Kill Their Children: Understanding the Acts of Moms from Susan Smith to the "Prom Mom"*. New York University Press: New York, USA, 2001.
12. Paravantes, Andrew James. "Utopian Studies" 30 (2019): 505–530. [DOI: 10.5325/utopianstudies.30.3.0505]
13. Ruiz, Sarah A. "Social order and women's roles in the utopian novels of Edward Bellamy, H.G. Wells, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman." Master of Arts in History (edited by C. Burke). dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.9/142/Thesis%20Final%20Edition.pdf?sequence=1. California State University – Sacramento, 2009.
14. Sandilands, Catriona. "Rainbow's end? Lesbian separatism and the ongoing politics of ecotopia." In: *Feminist Utopias: Re-visioning Our Futures*, edited by Margrit Eichler, Susan M. Neysmith, and Judy Larkin. Inanna Publications: Toronto and Education, Inc, 2002, pp. 37–50.
15. Jatt, Ariba, Mahesar, Rameez, and Arain, Muhammad Asghar. "The Question of Woman's Identity and Hijab: A Critical Study of Sabyn Javeri's 'the Urge' (Hijabistan, 2019)." [DOI: 10.17051/ilkonline.2021.05.726]
16. Suhasini, P. "These short stories explore the diversities of different feminisms, with the hijab as a symbol." *Scroll.in*. <https://scroll.in/article/926182/these-short-stories-explore-the-diversities-of-different-feminisms-with-the-hijab-as-a-symbol>. 2019.
17. Wagner-Lawlor, Jennifer A. *Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 2013.
18. "A world without men." In: *Hijabistan*, edited by Sabyn Javeri. HarperCollins: India, 2019.
19. Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "From gutenber.org." Retrieved 15 February 2020. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32/32-h/32-h.htm>. Project Gutenberg, 2008.
20. Hasan, Lubna R. "Review: Hijabistan by Sabyn Javeri." *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/review-hijabistan-by-sabyn-javeri/story-HRR7SDCA6PmISD2rqWWXuO.html>. 19 April 2019.

21. Suresh, Revathi. "Hijabistan by Sabyn Javeri: Eve in headscarf." *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/books/hijabistan-by-sabyn-javeri-eve-in-headscarf/article26607100.ece>. 2019.
22. "The urge." In: *Hijabistan*, edited by Sabyn Javeri. HarperCollins: India, 2019.
23. West, Lindy. "Herland: The forgotten feminist classic about a civilisation without men." *The Guardian*. From <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/mar/30/herland-forgotten-feminist-classic-about-civilisation-without-men>. Retrieved 15 February 2020. 30 March 2015.

Corresponding author:

Sameer Ahmed

sameer@gcu.edu.pk