Hope, destruction, and rebirth: acts of recovery in gender separatist feminist utopian literature

Anli, Z.

2. Destruction as a utopian cleansing mechanism

In the previous chapter, I argued that the notion of hope is inherent in the anticipation, theorization, and production of gender separatist feminist utopian literature. This is the case even, so I contended, when the ways in which the plot progresses do not directly reflect and present any hope. Moylan's focus on the concept and aspects of critical utopias proved to be useful here in that the genre of critical utopia creates a literary connection between dystopia and eutopia; a connection I consider to hold a strong hopeful potential. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, while eutopian narratives focus on emphasizing the qualities of a good space and society, dystopian narratives make use of negative events to make their point, and critical utopian narratives have elements of both, without the necessary requirement of closure or finality. Now I concentrate in this chapter on the destruction motif, which acts as a didactic tool for rebuilding these utopian societies in gender separatist utopian literature. The works in my corpus take a specifically uncompromising and seemingly pessimistic approach at the beginning of their project of reform: the destruction of the existing world. In this subgenre, which is also referred to as *gynotopia*, the destruction of the previous mixed-sex existence appears to be a narrative prerequisite for starting over and creating a new and supposedly improved world.[123] In my study of the subgenre, I highlight some specific parallelisms between the revolutionary influence of various radical feminist thinkers from the '60s and '70s and the theme of destruction within the novels in my corpus.

Already at the beginning of my research into gender separatist feminist utopianism, I noticed the common tendency in the plots to destroy the existent status quo. This destruction functions as an intervention prior to the attempt to create a better world for women where

[123] See Darby Lewes, "Gynotopia: A Checklist of Nineteenth-Century Utopias by American Women." *Legacy* 6, no. 2, 1989, pp. 29-41.

women's rights are being respected. In order to create this eutopian space, the women in the novels from this subgenre first have to obtain the freedom to express what needs to be expressed. In that regard, the first prerequisite for achieving a gender separatist community is to break free from the established sociopolitical, judicial, and economic system. This creative freedom almost always immediately comes after, or coincides with, an act of destruction.

In this space of rupture, utopian hope rests in the act of formulating or defining the very structure of eutopia itself. This implies that hope need not only be the expression of a future state of affairs but can also act as the motivation behind an act of destruction. Hope does not only concern the end result of a realized eutopia, it motivates the beginning of its realization. For Moylan, the interrogation and reassessment of the present and the conception of an improved future hold critical significance. This significance rises beyond whether a text is to be considered eutopian or dystopian in perceived intention.[124] This is also the stance I take in the exploration of the destruction motif in the gender separatist literature in my corpus. Exploring and demonstrating why the motif of destruction has become a common narrative element in the subgenre of gender separatist utopian literature has the potential to show why destruction is needed in the first place before the creation of a eutopian space.

At this point, utopian fiction's close connection with science fiction creates a flexible and fruitful ground for imaginative attempts to realize destruction and world-building. The instances of destruction and creation of a different kind of world fall within the context of science fiction due to its ability to leave the restraints of realism behind. The endless possibilities within the genre of science fiction provide feminist authors with unbridled space in which they can reimagine new worlds with renewed sociopolitical power structures that favor women over men. The narrative potential of science fiction was one object of study by Scottish feminist scholar, author, and teacher Sarah LeFanu, who worked predominantly on the intersection between

[124] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 12.

feminism and science fiction. In her 1989 study *Feminism and Science Fiction*, LeFanu asserts that feminist writers took up the challenge of radical feminists and imagined many feminist utopian worlds in the 1970s.[125] They used the science fiction form to explore the sexual politics of their period.[126] If radical feminism and political lesbianism have been part of the more general women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the novels from the 1980s that I am studying fit within the same range of thought, advocating for radical change and restructuring of the world. The novels in this subgenre are historically influenced, that is, by the social movements of the era, and they can be considered as an exploratory narrative practice of the theory. "What would happen if we imagined a different reality?" is one of the questions that initiated utopian thinking and literary imagination in this context.

LeFanu's research on several women authors of utopias (works of authors such as James Tiptree Jr., Ursula K. Le Guin, Suzy McKee Charnas, Joanna Russ) shows how certain aspects of science fiction can support the elimination of the existing reality and the birth of new scenarios:

> By borrowing from other literary forms it lets writers defamiliarise the familiar, and make familiar the new and strange. These twin possibilities, apparently contradictory (but SF is full of contradictions), offer enormous scope to women writers who are thus released from the constraints of realism. The social and sexual hierarchies of the contemporary world can be examined through the process of "estrangement," thus challenging normative ideas of gender roles, and visions of different worlds can be created and made familiar to the reader through the process of narrative. SF narrative can be used to break down or to build up.[127]

[125] The study published under this title appeared a year earlier as *In the Chink of the World Machine*, 1988.
[126] LeFanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, 71.
[127] Ibid, 22.

By defamiliarizing the familiar, just as science fiction authors do, authors of separatist feminist fiction can subvert conventional masculine frameworks and traditions and show the readers different possibilities under different communal structures. Vice versa, the new and strange can be made familiar through the grand narratives of political power, as happens when councils of women lead the post-apocalyptic communities, for instance in Gilman's *Herland*; as happens when men are used as reproductive slaves as in Pamela Sargent's *The Shore of Women*; and as happens when men are brainwashed into being warriors as in Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country*. The dynamic between estrangement and familiarity encourages and emphasizes the understanding that the novel takes place in a perhaps completely different but also recognizable world where gender roles are reversed and/or exaggerated. In other words, the definitions, assumptions, and power relations regarding the status of women and men are subverted but still remembered for reasons of comparison. That said, when authors rely on defamiliarization in the utopian construction of new realities, they often also choose to destroy the familiar current existence; a destruction needed for the creation of a new one.[128] In this way, the reader is distanced from the present, and the destruction is supposed to cleanse the familiar that existed prior to the destruction. But again, the defamiliarizing effect makes the execution and acceptance of the new society easier to adapt to and makes the readers more easily familiar with the new situation.[129]

The novels that I discuss in this chapter are gender separatist utopias written in the 1980s United States. Apart from a short description of Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1986), I focus especially on two novels to guide my research of the destruction motif: *The Shore of Women* by Pamela Sargent (1986) and *The Gate to Women's Country* by Sheri S. Tepper (1988). I left out

[128] On the relationship between feminism and science fiction, see Jane Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten's *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women: Worlds of Difference*, 1994 and Jane Donawerth's *Frankenstein's Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction*, 1997.

[129] For an extensive analysis of patterns of violence in this feminist utopian novel, see Elizabeth Anne Maxwell. "The Problem of Violence in Sheri S. Tepper's Feminist Utopia, *The Gate to Women's Country*." *Hecate* 37, no. 2, Nov. 2011, pp. 110.

Suzy McKee Charnas' *Holdfast Chronicles* tetralogy (1981) and Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean* (1986) because there is neither not enough emphasis on nor mention of how the pre-utopian destruction took place and how the destruction affected the aftermath. While the main focus will be on the two novels from the '80s, there will be examples from other eras where relevant. In the following subsections, I subsequently focus on the theoretical context of the destruction motif in gender separatist feminist utopian novels; after that, I focus on the possible motivation behind this particular type of destruction; and finally on the hopeful utopian potential in the concept of destruction.

My discussion is limited to the phenomenon of feminist utopian separatism. Even though there is a rich history of Afrofuturism and Black utopian literature, the works in my corpus are not written by authors of color.[130] In my research, and in contrast with the theoretical and political context of the novels studied, I did not come across novels written by women authors of color where the plot had a clear separation of physical spaces and governance based on gender. Historically, people of color had to experience segregation on a large scale, which perhaps may have affected their choices not to opt for separatist plot elements. The intersecting and conflicting forms of oppression across diverse issues concerning race, gender, and economic class – among other aspects – are an undeniable force in the establishment of new frameworks for questioning and subverting intersecting oppressions.[131] Here, the concept of intersectionality can be observed and extrapolated practically in different kinds of utopian worlds, including non-separatist critical utopian frameworks next to the paradigm of gender separation. However, just as utopias written by women have been understudied for a long time and had to be discovered

[130] See Jayna Brown's *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*, 2021.

[131] For an overview on intersectionality, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140:139-167, 1989.

and put under the spotlight, Black feminist separatist utopian fiction may also need unearthing and newfound appreciation.[132] This would be the subject of another research project.

In the following sections, I aim to position these gender separatist novels within their sociopolitical and historical context by showing that these novels were influenced by the movements that took place in the United States during the 1960s and ’70s. Even though gender separatist feminist utopian literature existed in the centuries prior to the ’60s and ’70s, taking a closer look at the sociopolitical atmosphere of the period in the United States can help illuminate one of the foundational elements of the subgenre: radical change. This was a period when the features of the subgenre became more concrete, likely in harmony with the foundations of radical feminism. I aim to historically situate, then, the theoretical and sociopolitical roots of gender separatist feminism by arguing that the gender separatist novels written in the 1980s were influenced by sociopolitical movements that took place in the United States during the ’60s and ’70s. The theoretical, emancipatory debates of that period inspire the theme of destruction in these gender separatist utopian novels and draw critical attention towards the interaction between feminist utopian literature and feminist theory. I aim to explore this interaction by demonstrating the relevant parallelisms between theoretical developments and the novels chosen for this chapter.

The theoretical origins of the destruction motif

In his research, Moylan explores the concept of critical utopia, analyzes the decline in positive utopian thought, and examines the possible influence of contemporary sociopolitical events on the impressions of literary imagination within utopian literature:

[132] For a more in-depth look at Black feminist utopianism, see Megha Patel’s dissertation *Black Feminist Utopianism and Gloria Naylor’s* Mama Day.

> Inspired by the movements of the 1960s and finding new imagery in the alternatives being explored in the 1970s, the critical utopia is part of the political practice and visions shared by a variety of autonomous oppositional movements that reject the domination of the emerging system of transnational corporations and post-industrial production and ideological structures.[133]

The overall political climate of the period, as mentioned above, also applies to the revolutionary feminist ideology of the period. The literary works in question are both products of societal influences and critically subvert ideological assumptions. These works experiment with existing structures and/or create completely new structures inspired by ongoing contemporary events. Here, Moylan's concept of critical utopianism allows the reader to uncover both eutopian and dystopian aspects of the proposed utopia, and provides ample opportunities for the exploration of various dimensions of world-building practices.

As I mentioned before, the '60s and '70s were powerful and fruitful decades for critical cultural studies and feminism. The second wave of feminism during this period in the United States and other countries of the global West set the stage for the radical feminist movement which was largely influenced by the vigorous and revolutionary spirit of the civil rights movement and the student movement of the period.[134] The core principles of this participatory movement were also deeply ingrained in the leftist movement of the time. However, even within the leftist movement, women were left at the margins. As women's history scholar Alice Echols underlines in her archival study of radical feminism, *Daring to Be Bad*, even when the leftist movement of the period was socialist, anti-militarist, and anti-capitalist, women within the

[133] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 11.
[134] Since my novels are written by North American authors, here I concentrate on the events that took place in the United States.

movement had to persevere in fighting for their space. This was especially the case in leadership and decision-making positions. In this context, women had to fight multiple battles against male supremacy both inside and outside the movement.[135]

One of the main driving notions of radical feminism was the idea that women formed a sex-based class and this served as the basis of their oppression. Radical feminists emphasized the systematic oppression that caused gender inequality. This concept aimed to address and challenge the systemic issues in the context of gender politics. At the time, the notion of women's separateness operated above racial and economic differences; it was ubiquitous. These political practices would later be criticized, among other initiatives, "by a group of women's liberationists from Detroit (including Barbara Burris, Kathleen Barry, and Joanne Parrent)" in their manifesto titled *The Fourth World Manifesto* where they question the hierarchy of privileges within the ranks of radical feminism.[136] Nonetheless, radical feminists facilitated the earliest initiatives for challenging and changing the grand metanarratives around the dominant tradition of the nuclear family, of compulsory heterosexuality, and of patriarchal oppression at the level of family, individuality, and the professional lives of women.[137] Consciousness-raising meetings, protests against abortion and rape laws, and critiques of how the tenets of patriarchy affected the sociopolitical lives of women were among the basic building blocks of radical

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[135] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975*, 3.

[136] Ibid, 245.

[137] See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) for her thoughts on the sexual class dynamics; Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970) for her arguments on the role of male-dominated society and patriarchy in women's subjugation; Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) for her perspective of challenging heteronormativity and bringing lesbian feminism to the forefront; Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (1980) for her intersectional Marxist analysis of subjugation of women of all ethnic backgrounds; Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983) for her stance on the systemic suppression of women's authorship and publication avenues; Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (1983) for her thoughts on sexism as a distinct form of oppression; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) for her intersectional approach that encompasses gender, class, and race; Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1987) for comprehensive look at the institution of patriarchy; Carol Hanisch, "The Personal is Political" (2006) for the argument that the issues faced by housewives and mothers, such as problems in childbearing, childrearing, and division of household tasks, are not private but political matters that need consciousness-raising and solutions in the public sphere; Barbara J. Love, *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975* (2006) for an extended account of the works of feminist activists such as Kathie Sarachild, Marilyn Webb, and Gloria Steinem.

feminism.[138] Women's sexual and reproductive liberation was at the forefront of radical feminism in the theoretical arena through consciousness-raising and encouragement of legislative adjustments.

The rejection of the liberalist wing of the leftist movement brought about ideas of reform that aimed to bring momentum to the radical feminist movement. Radical feminists did not believe that reform within a corrupt and unjust sociopolitical system would bring lasting change. Therefore, as Echols demonstrates, the movement prioritized forms of participatory democracy and decentralization of power:

> The radicalism of the '60s was less concerned with reforming society than with developing forms that would prefigure the utopian community of the future. Thus there was little enthusiasm for electoral politics and enormous interest in creating political processes that would maximize individual participation and equalize power.[139]

While earlier liberal movements aimed at working towards gender equality and support within the existing political structure, radical feminism questioned the root causes of oppression which stemmed from how the state and society were structured throughout history. As Echols mentions, in its revolutionary essence, radical feminism is a utopian ideology as, from a Blochian standpoint, the movement hopes and aims to create a better world. Since radical feminism considers gender as a class within hierarchical power structures, it follows an abolitionist ideology which, in this context, indicates the complete uprooting of the current system. This

[138] Some foundational feminist groups within the movement were New York Radical Women, Redstockings, Cell 16 and The Feminists. Please see Echols above for a detailed account of the differences and common goals among these groups.
[139] Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 16.

intention is also reflected in the terminology itself: The etymology of the word *radical* comes "from Latin *radicalis* 'of or having roots,' from Latin *radix* (genitive *radicis*) 'root' (from PIE root **wrād*- 'branch, root')." Thus, moving away from temporary solutions, looking to find the root causes of oppression, and aiming to uproot the system are integral parts and aspirations of this movement.[140]

Just as gender separatist feminist utopian literature has its conflicting issues, radical feminism has its shortcomings in certain contexts. As a movement, radical feminism was led by white women and criticized for the whiteness of the problems that were raised, which concentrated specifically on the challenges white women faced in their lives.[141] For example, while white women were fighting for their right to work outside the house, black women had a long history of working as slaves in a variety of fields that had not been radically changed after the abolition of slavery. Women of color faced sharply different challenges on top of the challenges faced by white women. Excluded from leadership positions and having their voices unheard and ignored within the mainstream radical feminist organizations, black feminists started to regroup and highlight their own specific struggles and contexts.

Feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins provides a comprehensive history of Black feminism in her work *Black Feminist Thought*. The lack of solidarity within the radical feminist organizations is evident in the resources provided:

> Ironically, Western feminisms have also suppressed Black women's ideas (duCille 1996, 81-119). Even though Black women intellectuals have long expressed a distinctive African-influenced and feminist sensibility about how race and class intersect in structuring gender, historically we have not been full

[140] For the extended etymology of the word *radical*, see https://www.etymonline.com/word/radical
[141] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 5.

> participants in White feminist organizations (Giddings 1984; Zinn et al. 1986; Caraway 1991). As a result, African-American, Latino, Native American, and Asian-American women have criticized Western feminisms for being racist and overly concerned with White, middle-class women's issues (Moraga and Anzaldua 1981; Smith 1982a; Dill 1983; Davis 1989).[142]

The quote itself is abundant with references to feminist activists and scholars which would fill a whole dissertation by themselves, if not multiples. Since the subject matter is larger than the confines of utopianism itself (or not so much in a Blochian sense), I will briefly go over some of the relevant references in-text instead of in the footnotes, as I prefer not to put the references to these scholars solely in footnotes. Instead, I'd like to express a respectful acknowledgment of their contributions to emancipatory justice, albeit briefly. As referenced by Collins in her influential anthology, Black feminist theorist and African American literature scholar Ann duCille challenges the internalized racial and gender stereotypes in the United States in her book titled *Skin Trade* (1996). Paula J. Giddings is a historian, civil rights activist, and the author of *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984), which underscores the often overlooked impact that African American women have had on the race and women's movements throughout the course of American history. North American sociologist Maxine Baca Zinn examines the lived experiences of women of color within the intersecting realms of race, class, and gender, and her article (together with Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, Bonnie Thornton Dill) titled, "The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies" (1986), examines how the revolutionary movement of the '60s and the '70s continued into the academia, their current struggles and goals for change. Nancie Ellen Caraway was the former First Lady of Hawai but also a political scientist, feminist scholar, and activist at

[142] Ibid.

the local university. Her work *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (1991) looks into how Black and white feminisms interact. The reference that says "Moraga and Anzaldua 1981" is a quintessential anthology on intersectional feminism (African American civil rights activist and critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw expanded on this concept in 1989[143]). Edited by the African American lesbian feminist activist and scholar Barbara Smith in 1982, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* is another crucial feminist anthology that engages the intersection of race and gender. African American feminist scholar Bonnie Thornton Dill published an article titled "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood" in 1983 which concentrated on solutions to the situation that the sisterhood was not as powerful between women of color and white feminists. Last but not least, African American feminist political activist and scholar Angela Davis focuses on the contemporary political and social challenges in an intersectional manner in her work *Women, Culture, and Politics* (1989).

As analyzed and debated by many activists and scholars above, the sociopolitical and academic exclusion gave speed to the cause of Black women to form their own coalitions and face their own challenges. In this context, Black feminism supports the idea that Black women are just as worthy of emancipation and equality as white women and underlines the fact that Black women in society are oppressed in fundamentally different ways than white women. Consequently, Black feminist activists formed their own organizations: first and foremost, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) which took on issues specific to the oppression of Black women as well as those issues that were overlooked in the grand narratives of white radical feminists.

Simultaneously, more and more feminist utopian ideals could be observed in radical feminist lesbian circles. Within the ranks of white feminists and Black feminists, radical feminist

[143] See Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality Essential Writings*, (New York: New Press 2022).

lesbians were also searching for their own places. The assumed compulsory heterosexuality within the left-wing feminist movements created the need for a radical lesbian space in politics.[144] In particular, Black feminist lesbians needed their own space due to being excluded from both Black leftist movements and the radical feminist movement in general. As an outcome of this urgent need, The Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist socialist lesbian organization, published a statement that became one of the foundational texts in Black feminism. The members of the collective aimed to create and fill that lesbian feminist space with their call for intersectionality. While the radical feminist movement is predominantly abolitionist and revolutionary, the statement from the Collective is fundamentally utopian, also in its explicit mentioning of the necessity of the destruction of the status quo:

> We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources.[145]

The passage starts with an explicit reference to the necessity of destruction: the necessary destruction of the existing system. The rebuilding process would collectively benefit the people and not the state or those who serve the interests of the state. The way the new world is envisioned is in line with the world-building practices of the novels in my corpus in which

[144] See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 5 (4): 631–660, 1980.
[145] The Combahee River Collective Statement can be read here: https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/

destruction is followed by a socialist division of labor. In this way, the manifesto of the Collective runs parallel to the motifs and plots of gender separatist utopias.

In contemporary feminist literature, then, the notion of a single-sexed world provides a free space for exploring gender politics and relations away from the confines and conflicts of patriarchy in the absence of men. The belief that women had to physically and unconditionally separate from men in order to achieve their goals of feminist emancipation was at the center of the concept of single-sexed worlds. These gender separatist worlds portray sexuality in a heterosexual, homosexual, and asexual way, if not a mixture of all these elements. Nonetheless, separating from males and patriarchal structures was the focal point of these literary narratives and political radical lesbianism at large – not specifically the influence of sexuality within the plots or political movements. Before I move on to consider the destruction motif in more detail, I provide some paradigms or radical feminist thinking by representative radical feminist authors, that placed the destruction motif at the heart of radical feminist theory. Here, I observe possible interactions between the ideas developed in feminist theory and gender separatist feminist utopian literature both from within the same period and beyond.

Figures of influence: theory and literature in parallel

In this subsection, I try to do justice to the rich herstory of radical and separatist feminism by highlighting influential figures from the period and consulting them to gain a better understanding of my corpus. With a writing career spanning from the ’60s to the ’90s, Monique Wittig (1935-2003) was one of the strongest voices of French feminism. Her work was influential for questioning heterosexuality as an oppressive political structure and an integral aspect of patriarchy. As a member of the radical lesbian group *Féministes Révolutionnaires*, she argued that lesbians were not women because the concept of woman was identified in relation to the concept of man. Since lesbians were not associated with any social relation to men,

lesbianism was seen as a legitimate way of escaping the dominant patriarchal metanarrative. In the passage below, she argues in favor of the destruction of the systems that subjugate women:

> We [lesbians] are escapees from our class in the same way as the American runaway slaves were when escaping slavery and becoming free. For us this is an absolute necessity; our survival demands that we contribute all our strength to the destruction of the class of women within which men appropriate women. This can be accomplished only by the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between the sexes to justify this oppression.[146]

When Wittig calls for an escape from "our class," she means for lesbians to renounce identifying as women so that the restrictions on the existing class will no longer apply to them. Thus, in her line of thinking, the escape from and the destruction of compulsory heterosexuality is mandatory for ending the oppression of women. For her, becoming lesbian is the key to freedom. Only then can women be free from the gender binary and gender-based oppression.

The novels in my study likewise start by not only destroying the existing world order but also by eradicating the system of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and therefore heteronormativity. Even when sexuality is not part of the individual or communal practices in radical lesbian feminist groups, the communities in gender separatist utopian novels are largely radical lesbians due to their decision and dedication to live together as communities of women away from men. Here, Wittig's message of escape from compulsory heteronormativity matches the basic principles of gender separatist feminist utopianism.

[146] Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," *The Straight Mind*, 30.

Jewish Canadian radical feminist author and activist Shulamith Firestone (1945-2012), who worked in the United States, was another central figure of radical feminism, and one of the founding members of radical feminist groups New York Radical Women, Redstockings, and New York Radical Feminists. In *The Dialectic of Sex*: *The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Firestone lays the theoretical foundations that fuel her activism. She observes the central aim of radical feminism as such:

> In the radical feminist view, the new feminism is not just the revival of a serious political movement for social equality. It is the second wave of the most important revolution in history. Its aim. overthrow of the oldest, most rigid class/caste system in existence, the class system based on sex - a system consolidated over thousands of years, lending the archetypal male and female roles an undeserved legitimacy and seeming permanence. In this perspective, the pioneer Western feminist movement was only the first onslaught, the fifty-year ridicule that followed it only a first counteroffensive - the dawn of a long struggle to break free from the oppressive power structures set up by nature and reinforced by man. In this light, let's take a look at American feminism.[147]

The sex-based class system mentioned here is reinforced every day due to the model encouraged by the nuclear family and upheld by the patriarchal system. Firestone details how the nuclear family is the first place where people learn the working mechanisms of oppressive power structures and how elusive these gender roles can be. In parallel, the heteronormative nuclear family is one of the dominant concepts that is systematically abandoned in gender separatist feminist utopian novels.

[147] Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 15.

North American radical feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye (1941-) worked explicitly on the theme of separatism as well. She found the theme of feminist separatism inherently connected to lesbianism and in general ubiquitous: from divorce to women-only spaces such as shelters and even lesbian bars. She saw separatism as a mode of separation from not only men but also from any patriarchal institution and relationship that supports male privilege. In her words:

> When our feminist acts or practices have an aspect of separation, we are assuming power by controlling access and simultaneously by undertaking definition. […] When women separate (withdraw, break out, regroup, transcend, shove aside, step outside, migrate, say no) we are simultaneously controlling access and defining. We are doubly insubordinate, since neither of these is permitted. And access and definition are fundamental ingredients in the alchemy of power, so we are doubly, and radically, insubordinate.[148]

Frye underlines the power inherent in this radical restructuring of society. This act of separation and redefining what it means to be a woman, to have a family, and to exist within society automatically destroys the gender binary and women's adherence to this binary. With Frye destruction is implied, then, through the concept of separatism; destruction is not made explicit but implied in revolutionary acts of insubordination or subversion. In other words, women destroy established patriarchal structures by way of overturning or simply defying them. She argues that women partake in these acts of separation every day to varying degrees. Her support for separation and specifically for women-only spaces aligns with the theme of gender separatist feminist utopian literature in which women-only spaces are the norm.

[148] Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 107.

Caribbean American civil rights activist and feminist Audre Lorde (1934-1992) underlined the value of radical transformation in order to bring about substantial change. Lorde's work was revolutionary and inclusive in the sense that she challenged the assumed hierarchy of white feminism and racism within feminist thought. One of the central tenets of radical lesbianism was the notion that adhering to the heterosexual mentality showed dependence on patriarchy. Lesbian feminist groups have interpreted this dependence as a privileged position of benefiting from patriarchy. Likewise, Lorde argued that white feminism was similarly benefiting from patriarchy. Lorde's approach to feminism was utopian in the sense that she argued for the deconstruction of white feminism and in favor of reaching a more inclusive and intersectional momentum:

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.[149]

This society's definition of acceptable women symbolizes upper-middle-class white feminists. Lorde's words inspire intersectionality and sisterhood among those marginalized from the

[149] Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," *This Bridge Called My Back*, 95.

traditional definitions of society. Learning how to stand alone-but-together signals towards cooperation and commonality. Her iconic statement "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" makes it clear that no amount of adjustment or reform can be sufficient to make a sustainable and solid change. It is a radical utopian sentiment that encourages change from scratch because the tools of patriarchy would end up benefiting the patriarchy itself. Her activist voice is the revolutionary force behind her radical theory, which is not reformist, but requires destruction. Her words connote a manifesto that calls for the creation of a gender separatist utopian space. The parallel with the novels I study is predominantly that the protagonists are looking for a space, or "seek a world in which we can all flourish," in a process of learning: a pedagogical process.

Similarly, the radical restructuring of society was one of the concepts Mary Daly's (1928-2010) work emphasized. Daly was a North American self-identified radical lesbian feminist, who expanded on her ideas concerning radical separatist lesbianism in her work *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. While not directly mentioning and advising specific forms of destruction, she saw great benefit in Amazonian sisterhood which could not exist within a patriarchal structure:

> Whereas discussion of relations between men and women eulogize the so-called complementarity of opposites, an Amazonian analysis of female friendship/love discovers the fact that the basis of woman-identified relationships is neither biological differences nor socially constructed opposite roles. […] Rather than relying upon stereotypic role relationships, Amazon friends/lovers/sisters cast our Selves into a creative variety of developing relationships with each other. Since

> there are no models, no roles, no institutionalized relationships to fall back upon, we move together and apart in ever-varying patterns of relating.[150]

In the passage above, Daly describes a worldview that is not patriarchal and that does not contain men. All relationships are Amazonian and they revolve around women. Her vision of an Amazonian world stands in favor of gender separatist feminism. Her version of gender separatist utopia urges the reader to avoid traditional gender roles and relationships, and encourages the women to find new ways to form relationships with each other. The communities of women in the gender separatist novels in my corpus follow a similar path of building structures that avert traditional and patriarchal ways of existing and building connections through relationality. However, the first step to realizing this ambition is the destruction of their current world.

In the theoretical frameworks of radical feminism, the theme of destruction is sometimes explicit, but more often implicit whereas in the gender separatist utopian novels, this theme is explicit. Nevertheless, the vision of a theorized Amazonian space shares similar separatist principles with the utopian literature I am studying in this dissertation. The gender separatist novels in my corpus establish single-sexed worlds where the problems of the period in which radical feminism rose to prominence were solved due to the distinct separation of sexes. This does not deny that other problems resurfaced due to the undeniable abuse of power within these single-sexed worlds. This brings me back to the theme of destruction, its different manifestations, and its consequences. At this point, I want to elaborate on and examine the different types of destruction I came across in the novels selected.

[150] Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 382.

Externalization of the motivations for destruction

Destruction in the plots of gender separatist utopian works is an act to which the reader is exposed often when one of the protagonists starts recounting the history of their utopian land. Essentially, this plot element facilitates a moment of rupture from the state of women's lives in the previous world and allows for a new beginning. However, the radical act of destruction often poses a hindrance to the peaceful functioning of the new utopia. The events of the past and what preceded these events leave traces for the people of the new utopia to discover. Since the destruction as a plot element forms a link between the history of the world before the destruction and the utopian space that is built right after, defining or situating the responsibility of that destruction becomes crucial to the formation and maintenance of the utopian space.

To look at destruction as a defining plot element, I went through the selected primary sources and gathered information on how the destruction took place in the novels. In some of these, it is clearly explained that the destruction took place due to natural causes such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or other types of natural disasters. In others, the reason can be more intentional and (hu)man-made such as nuclear bombing or other acts of violence. This is what I refer to as the externalization of the destruction motif: the responsibility of causing the destruction of the previous world is placed on events or people other than the leaders or the residents of the newly constituted feminist utopian space. I argue that this externalization of the destruction motif makes it possible to displace the responsibility of the destruction somewhere far away from women within the new utopian space and allows this new space to have a neutral starting point.

A common type of destruction in these novels is manmade destruction with unintended causes. This plot choice puts the blame on the assumed aggression of the male species. As mentioned in the first chapter, *Mizora*, written by Mary E. Bradley Lane and published in 1880, takes a direct political approach to the theme of destruction in the form of a civil war. The novel

depicts a country of women that has existed for the last three thousand years. Its state of affairs before the destruction is portrayed as dominated by men in public and private spheres. Women are set against a stark discrepancy in the rights they have and their sociopolitical status. Many calamities, wars, skirmishes, and natural disasters are included in the destruction narrative, emphasizing the great divide between gender roles and how inconsolable the situation becomes for their society in general, but especially for women who are depicted as the oppressed. In this novel, the concept of political revolution is used as the element of destruction. It is specifically underlined that women's struggle lasted a very long time, their victory ended up limiting the privileges of the adult males, and there was no common ground between men and women that could facilitate a mixed-sex living arrangement. The way the destruction theme is presented implies that only expansive and unflinching political action can resolve the tension and provide sustainable change and improvement for the whole society. The important point for now, however, is that the women within the newly created world were not responsible for the destruction.

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian trilogy *Herland*, which was written during the First World War and was published in 1915, society has taken a big hit due to wars in which most of the male population is wiped out. Since it was the men who went to battle, the remaining and surviving portion of the society are mostly women.[151] Here a devastating war between women and the remaining men pushes the society into further chaos. This war is followed by natural disasters that caused the passageways among the mountains to cave in and kept the women physically blocked from the rest of the world. This space is where they end up creating a new world out of remnants of the past. *Herland* makes use of the colonial discovery narrative trope of a stranger man, or a group of men, stumbling upon a seemingly uncharted and uncivilized space of women. As the women teach men their ways of living, strangely enough,

[151] Gilman, *Herland*, 56.

they quickly form romantic couples and explore heterosexual and heteronormative life, which is something the women in *Herland* have not experienced before. The novel ends with one of the women deciding to travel to the United States with her husband to explore the outside world and everything she can learn from it.

As I mentioned above, the externalization of the responsibility for the destruction that took place in the past helps to motivate and convince the reader that the new feminist utopian space is built out of immediate necessity due to the natural causes of the event. This displacement of responsibility sets a neutral tone for the beginning of the feminist utopian space. In the case of *Herland*, the destruction is explicitly caused by a natural *deus ex machina*, but it is implicitly also the logical consequence of male aggression. This aspect of the destruction deepens the issue of responsibility because it directly relates to how gender politics are being dealt with in the novel. The subject responsible for human destruction is represented in gendered language. This extends itself, however, to the so-called natural causes of destruction. In *Herland*, we can observe both the gendered language and displacement of responsibility of destruction on nature:

> They made a brave fight for their existence, but no nation can stand up against what the steamship companies call "an act of God." While the whole fighting force was doing its best to defend their mountain pathway, there occurred a volcanic outburst, with some local tremors, and the result was the complete filling up of the pass - their only outlet. Instead of a passage, a new ridge, sheer and high, stood between them and the sea; they were walled in, and beneath that wall lay their whole little army.[152]

[152] Ibid.

I read this volcanic eruption as a symbol of the male body in the act of driving the women into an inland trap, where they cannot escape from the erupted lava that is blocking their way. Then when the narrative continues to dwell on the tall mountains protecting what is in its crevices and curves, the symbolism shifts to the woman's body. Even if the causal agency is attributed to nature in this part of the post-destruction land formation in *Herland*, it is through symbolisms of the male or female body. Nature creating a new utopian space for women also falls within the principles of traditional ecofeminist thought, which can be observed as a large influence in *Herland*.

In other novels, the responsibility for the destruction becomes clearer as the plot progresses. A closer look at Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* provides us with a provoking example of hidden responsibility and accountability. In the field of feminist science fiction, Joanna Russ was one of the most outspoken radical feminists of the 1960s in the United States. She was a lifelong author of fiction and as an academic, she focused on literary criticism, feminist theory, and science fiction. Like LeFanu, later, she argued that science fiction was a way to express the endless tension between what is possible and impossible, what is present and what could be the future.[153] Although her writing style has been characterized as angry, she is mostly celebrated for her revolutionary language and radical fiction.[154] The feminist science fiction novel, *The Female Man*, was influential in the way it presents multiple realities at the same time by using the parallel universe trope. It was also controversial in the way some of those realities suggested violence against men as the best option to imagine a better way of living for women. As a novel that shares four stories of four women living in parallel universes, it gives the reader a chance to observe and compare different realities that exist without the awareness of the other universes.

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[153] LeFanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, 22.

[154] See Peter Fitting's article "For men only: A guide to reading single-sex worlds," *Women's Studies*, 14:2, 101-117, 1987.

The exposition of the destruction motif in one of the parallel realities takes place as follows: "Plague came to Whileaway in P.C. 17 (Preceding Catastrophe) and ended in A.C. 03, with half the population dead; it had started so slowly that no one knew about it until it was too late. It attacked males only."[155] Framing the death of males through a plague based on gender chromosomes makes sure that the responsibility for the death of countless men falls on unintentional and unpreventable causes. The passage continues with a detailed description of how women re-established order after the plague left them in a state of chaos. Due to the plague that killed only men, the women are left with the whole world to themselves to recreate, govern, and maintain. Again, the responsibility of breaking free from the past and the oppression of patriarchy seemingly falls on neutral territory due to the usage of a plague motif.

However, as the plot progresses, the actual method of destruction is revealed when one of the protagonists confesses to the deed:

> Whileaway's plague is a big lie. Your ancestors lied about it. It is I who gave you your 'plague,' my dear, about which you can now pietize and moralize to your heart's content; I, I, I, I am the plague, Janet Evason. I and the war I fought built your world for you, I and those like me, we gave you a thousand years of peace and love and the Whileawayan flowers nourish themselves on the bones of the men we have slain.[156]

While the conceptual choice of "plague" as a way to eliminate men altogether could be merely biological or medical terminology, a biblical allusion becomes clearer when the name of the culprit is revealed: Evason – "son of Eve" –, the woman who is considered to

[155] Russ, *The Female Man*, 12.
[156] Ibid, 211.

have committed the first sin. Taking this perspective into account, I argue that the plague symbolizes both a warning and a punishment for men. Bringing the plague upon men in order to save women from the oppression of patriarchy represents a rewriting of a biblical story. In this version, plague acts as divine justice exercised by a woman because male aggression is considered harmful to women and the planet. With the confession in the passage above, the plague is no longer a biological occurrence but a conscious intervention by one of the protagonists. Consequently, the readers come to the realization that the responsibility for the actual act of destruction was misattributed at the beginning. The passage ends with a very clear motivation: the plague came to pass because Janet Evason wanted to give the women "a thousand years of peace and love" at the expense of killing all men. As can be seen, the example of *The Female Man* presents a situation where multiple factors intermingle into the externalization of the act of destruction, which was actually internal; executed by a woman from within the utopian community.

Unlike the more conventional reasonings above, some novels base their destruction on interplanetary travel and the destruction of multiple planets, which contributes to the defamiliarization effect I have mentioned before. In Nicola Griffith's *Ammonite* from 1992, which I analyze more closely in the next chapter, the resetting of the current world takes place through an interplanetary mission of colonization. A planet called Jeep is rediscovered by a satellite probe which showed a small group of humans with unknown origins; however, there were a few clues about how the destruction motif was executed:

> […] two discoveries were made: that Jeep's natives were one hundred per cent female, and that there was a virus loose. The two were connected, of course. The incidence of infection of Company personnel was one hundred per cent. Eighty

> per cent of Company's female personnel recovered; all of the men, including Courtivron, died. The planet was closed; no one on, very few off.[157]

A virus that kills all the men on a planet, leaving it inhabited only by women, is the plot element that creates the destruction and the clean slate that follows. The discovery of this isolated planet is where the utopian narrative starts. This gender separatist utopian space is situated outside the confines of the planet Earth, which provides a slate so clean that the author could imagine anything as long as the scientific system is consistent within itself. Therefore, creating a planet in which to entertain and exercise feminist utopian ideas is an approach that works like a frame tale in terms of the infinite creativity and political freedom that comes with that choice. The virus causing the extinction of men in *Ammonite* sets the tone for allowing the reader to think that the virus discriminates on sex or another genetic characteristic. This plot choice emphasizes the biological essentialist view of gender difference through the choice of the destruction narrative.

In one novel the intersection of gender separatism and the destruction motif is exceptionally clear. *The Shore of Women*, written by the North American feminist author and editor Pamela Sargent in 1986, is a gender separatist utopian novel in which the effects of destruction are a common theme in the daily lives of the characters in the diegesis. In this novel, the development of the new utopian world takes place after a nuclear war, yet another common trope of the subgenre. In the new situation, the council of woman leaders makes such living arrangements that men are forced to live outside the city walls. These men visit the temples of The Lady that are scattered around the vast land. In these temples they see digital images of women, called "erotic dreams," and they do not know that real women exist outside these digital images. The real women live inside cities while extracting semen from men during these projected erotic dreams in order to continue to procreate. When the protagonist Larissa, one of

[157] Griffith, *Ammonite*, 21.

the inhabitants of the women's land, starts questioning the traditions of her community and ventures outside the city walls, she gets to meet men in person and gets treated as The Lady, who is the only woman character known to the outcast men.

In walled gender separatist communities such as this one, the event of destruction and the conversations about the old days are used as forewarnings. Repeatedly warning citizens of the gender separatist utopian community against the past is one of the most common ways of making the citizens relate to this past and willingly abide by the rules. When, for example, Larissa questions why a woman has to be exiled outside the city walls for attempting to murder another woman in self-defense, the reason the council gives her does not relate so much to the specific crime in question but instead to a larger condemnation of the past and the relentless repetition of the way things were: "Had such deeds gone unpunished in our past, we would never have been able to build our world on the ruins of the old; we could not have survived that struggle."[158] The council of women is afraid of the past and spreads that fear to the community to placate the community into obeying the new rules and traditions. This type of doom-mongering feeds the totalitarian regime and finds its legitimation in the destruction motif. The destruction is not to be repeated, it has to remain something of the past. In other novels, however, the notion of destruction as something of the past proves to be rather difficult, or impossible.

Studying the past or establishing the myth

In gender separatist feminist utopian novels, there is often a historian, an archivist, a clairvoyant, or someone with access to resources or skills that endow them with the knowledge of the past. The use of a monologue by one of the main characters is common in how the novels in my study convey the destructive events that happened in the past. This historical narrative is usually presented in a manner that elicits emotions in settings such as by the campfire, in a cave or while

[158] Sargent, *The Shore of Women*, 4.

hiding from danger. This narrative choice acts as a rationale for the revolutionary decisions to be made in order to protect the community from potential future destruction. At times the historian character is treated as an outcast because the amplification of cautionary tales about the atrocities of the past is not ideal for the governing councils or most citizens. The main reason for this that even among the cautionary tales, one can get a glimpse into the many human experiences that have been missed out on or that for which the protagonists have an urgent desire. This could cause unwelcome discoveries that could bring about another catastrophe like in the past. In most cases, the protagonists that encounter and communicate with historian characters end up questioning the morality of the rules of the community and deciding to explore the world outside the walls. This, in my opinion, is how these communities rewrite *herstory* by learning from *history*, and not being welcoming of this process is one of the pitfalls of the new matriarchies in the utopian texts that employ this narrative trope.[159]

Here I will take a look at an example from Sargent's *The Shore of Women* that I introduced in the previous section. In this novel, the historian protagonist within the community provides neutral and/or positive instances of the past as elements to be unearthed. This head historian is assigned to train the protagonist Larissa as a young historian. Here, for instance, are Larissa's first impressions from her training as a historian where she comes across an instance of heterosexual romantic love, just as she loves her partner Shayl within the community of women:

> I considered what history I knew at that point. Once men and women had lived together and had formed bonds. The old records showed that a woman might love

[159] I will continue to examine the literary trope of the historian character in my gender separatist feminist utopian corpus in the subsequent sections. However, here I will briefly mention some of the examples where this trope is functioning as a substantial part of the narrative: Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1405; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, 1915; Suzy McKee Charnas, *Walk to the End of the World*, 1974; Suzy McKee Charnas, *Motherlines*, 1981; Katherine V. Forrest, *Daughters of a Coral Dawn*, 1984; Sheri S. Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country*, 1989; Leona Gom, *The Y Chromosome*, 1990; Suzy McKee Charnas, *The Furies*, 1994; Leigh Richards, *Califia's Daughters*, 2004; Katherine V. Forrest, *Daughters of an Emerald Dusk*, 2005; Doris Lessing, *The Cleft*, 2007.

> a man as I had loved Shayl. Such love had been, of course, a trap. I could not imagine a woman willingly putting herself in the power of a man; women had given power to men, and men had nearly destroyed everything. It could not be allowed to happen again. […] History, I was beginning to see, might be instructive. I had read a few tales of women bought and sold, of depending on men for food and shelter, of being forced to endure contact with male bodies, of being murdered by men. Our ways were surely better.[160]

Larissa finds herself in a position where she is able to compare what she was taught at school versus what she is learning through her current study of history. She quickly realizes that the historical information that is circulated in schools is specifically chosen to reflect and uphold certain values while concealing others. What can be seen as the indoctrination of the council revolves around concentrating on gender-based atrocities and failed relationship dynamics. The history lessons in school feature no positive elements, as when stories are told of how a woman loving a man had to give up power, thus allowing the destruction of the past to happen again. References to the past are thus used as justifications for the current rules and, thereby, justifications for the destruction. They function as warnings that justify the destruction that took place as a result of which the gender separation could come to be. All this underlines the notion that men are evil by nature and education cannot salvage them.

The historian in *The Shore of Women* does not strive to change the ways of the gender separatist community; she only aims to take an impartial look at how life in the past used to be:

> It doesn't really change things. Whether or not men could behave ethically or peacefully isn't the point. The point is that they used their power, the power

[160] Ibid, 92.

> women gave them, to destroy the world, and can't ever be allowed to do that again. Nothing changes that. Most historians simply think it would be better for more of us to admit that ancient men weren't quite what a lot of women prefer to think they were.[161]

For this historian, knowledge about the past does not urge her to change anything about the traditions of her community, nor does it inspire her to empathize with the people of the past. The indoctrinated fear of men as a whole sex class and the glorification of women as a sex class confirm and corroborate the power and influence of the totalitarian regime. The destruction motif thus functions as a restraint on the community. This specific historian character disagrees with "most historians" who enjoy sharing knowledge on whether men from ancient times were as bad as the doctrines make them out to be. In this respect, historians with this attitude of servitude and loyalty are allowed to exist in the community without its leaders fearing a rebellion. Their function in society is to make sure that the dominant ideology is protected and supported, as I will explain in more detail below.

The difference between the older historian and the apprentice historian protagonist is their motivation and intention concerning the historical findings. In this context, Italian literary scholar Raffaella Baccolini argues that the recovery of historical knowledge leads to the recovery of individual and collective memory.[162] Because the totalitarian regime dominates the discourse around the past and its effects on the present, the collection of information and collective memory from the texts and artifacts becomes the first step in the resurgence of the forgotten past and its multifaceted effects on the present. Counter to this possibility, in *The Shore of Women*, when confronted with the idea of studying science to the point of rediscovering old machines and

[161] Ibid.
[162] Baccolini, "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction," 520.

old ways of using technology, the older historian mentions that they "wouldn't want to push too far, considering the violent applications of science in the past."[163] Reciting the wrongful ways of the past and the repercussions of destruction are daily practices that work to maintain the political structure in several gender separatist utopian novels. Or the destruction motif and the events of the past that are used to justify the current status quo, become false evidence for maintaining the new and strictly supervised gender roles. Whenever a character has difficulty adhering to the rules of the community, they are reminded of the past and the destruction stories.

Towards the end of the novel, one of the members of the governing council reveals the actual story of how the destruction took place:

> Once, women had given men the power over life that women had held since the beginning of human history; so we have all been taught. Men had used their power for evil, and the world had been devastated and poisoned in ancient times by the weapons men had controlled. The great fire came and, after it, the long winter. Only scattered communities in isolated places had survived, living for ages in underground shelters, for life on the surface was not possible. Earth refused to yield crops, animals sickened and died, and humankind's damaged genes whelped monsters. Below ground, life had gone on, in a fashion. Even in the shelters many did not live, and tunnels holding the dead were sealed off from the living. These shelters, we are told, were our purgatory, places in which to pay for our sins. Gradually, Earth began to heal itself, and in time, it became necessary for some to venture above ground.[164]

[163] Sargent, *The Shore of Women*, 94.
[164] Ibid, 95.

The simplification of women giving birth and thus being the bringer of life, and men using weapons and causing the end of the world is a common trope in gender separatist utopian novels. And here as well, "the great fire" followed by what is most likely a nuclear winter points to a devastating war. Fire as a cleanser of society acts as a religious metaphor in this context, cleansing the previous state of the society where women did not have as many rights and privileges as men. However, the destruction is also seen as a divine punishment when the shelters are referred to as "purgatory" where the remaining population had to "pay for their sins." In its referencing biblical stories of origin or its referencing to the destruction in religious terms, the destruction motif is developed into an origin myth. This is emphasized in the novel through the use of capitalized terminology, such as "Destruction" and "Rebirth" among others. The leaders of this women's community turn the destruction motif into a religious story to ensure that the community has a grand narrative to believe in when they begin questioning the status quo.

In this context Sarah LeFanu argues that "[d]ystopian visions are in a sense mythopoeic: depicting a creation myth in a future world of darkness and silence."[165] This also becomes clear in my example above and appears to be a more general characteristic of the subgenre. In gender separatist utopian novels there is usually a destruction myth that enables a (re)creation myth. Considering how the sociopolitical rules that come after the destruction are framed in a religious narrative, the flood myth appears as a good metaphor for the destruction that washes away the previous corrupt state of the society. The paradigmatic example of the flood myth is the biblical deluge sent by God as retribution, with the aim of cleansing the world, destroying civilization as it is, and creating the stage for rebuilding. However, I see the destruction myth in gender separatist utopian novels rather as a subversion of this flood myth. In fact, it is the reversal of the creation myth, in which women had a passive role as retold in *Genesis*.[166] Therefore, the feminist

[165] LeFanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, 73.
[166] *Genesis* 2.22: "Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man."

interpretation of this destruction myth includes women taking an active part either in the destruction, during cleansing, during rebuilding, or all of these at the same time. One influential divagation from the flood myth is that in gender separatist utopian novels written by woman authors, there is no special ark or the necessity to take two of every animal species. Instead, all women are welcome to stay in the new gated community as long as they abide by the rules of their community.

The flood myth is not necessarily a Christian story, moreover. It can be traced back to ancient Sumerians and can also be found in Hindu mythological accounts. Whether it is a Christian origin myth or not, the ethos of destruction and cleansing by fire or other natural elements appears in the plot as the new starting point of life. The choice of integrating an origin myth in the destruction pattern allows the novels to speculate about the origin of life and how to change the regular course of life into a new context that favors the well-being of women. In this perspective, the new world waiting to be rebuilt after the destruction rather underlines a *cycle* of destruction and renewal based on the archetype. It ushers in the possibility and the stage of tabula rasa – which is the subject of the next chapter.

The hopeful potential of destruction

What are the drawbacks of the radical destruction motif in gender separatist utopian novels? Even when destruction undoes what existed before, can it be considered a product of hope and also a bringer of hope in the plot? Or is the act of destruction, instead of holding the potential for reform, inherently anti-utopian? In order to shed some light on these questions, I examine Hans Achterhuis' critique of utopianism and his argument for the necessity of destruction in utopian narratives. Achterhuis' work is important because it includes a rich and engaging elaboration on anti-utopianism. In my dealing with Achterhuis I will also examine Merijn Oudenampsen's

response to Achterhuis' critique from almost the opposite perspective. I want to elaborate on their arguments in order to show how both theories interrelate to the novels in my research.

The reason why I chose to focus on the work of Dutch philosopher Hans Achterhuis is that he actively participates in discussions on social matters in general and specifically in the field of utopianism. His *magnum opus*, *De erfenis van de utopie* (*The legacy of utopia*), contains his critique on radical utopianism, which provides a relevant perspective on the novels in my study. Since Achterhuis argues that the theme of destruction is intrinsic to all utopian thought, his work helps me to explore how anti-utopian the cycle of destruction and creation in feminist utopian novels can be. First and foremost, Achterhuis is critical of the radical nature of destruction and eutopian world-building, which he sees as a holistic and totalitarian endeavor.[167] In the novels in my corpus, just as in countless other separatist utopian novels (whether dystopian or eutopian), destruction and rebirth are preferred over attempts to reform the existing society. The radical idea is that since every facet of the sociopolitical sphere is interconnected, radical change that is designed to really lead to another society is not possible without a sharp break from the past.

In his dealing with utopian thinking, Achterhuis criticizes the all-or-nothing mentality of utopian theory and practice. He believes that a utopian mentality is irreconcilable with reality. Setting "a disastrous present" against "the bright future" produces pessimistic and doomed results.[168] It may foster hope that change is possible by destroying the disastrous present so that things can start over. Yet the creation of a bright future will eventually fail because it is not possible to make utopias perfect. In order to make the new/future version more appealing (alleged to be eutopia), the present reality is represented darker and darker (alleged to be dystopia). This idea of "doom-mongering" is one of Achterhuis' criticisms against the feasibility

[167] Achterhuis, *De erfenis van de utopie*, 15.
[168] Ibid.

of creating and maintaining utopias.[169] Further, he states that utopias tend to become oppressive despite aiming to bring positive change. He argues that utopian authors and scholars do not recognize or fully determine the oppressive and manipulative aspects of utopian spaces.

As can be seen, Achterhuis has anti-utopian arguments. His thoughts on utopian world-building and the idea of the destruction of everything prior to utopia do not align with the perceived optimism of utopian thought. He believes that the actions motivated by utopianism inevitably require violence in order to transform their desired blueprint into reality. In his critique of destruction that takes place before the new utopia, Achterhuis mentions that while aiming to achieve progress in the perceived dystopian society, utopian consciousness needs to overlook and disregard the past, with its cultural traditions.[170] As Achterhuis argues, the cultural traditions and the heritage of a community can rather be an inspiring guiding factor to learn from. In contrast, in radical feminist theory, the empowerment that originates from breaking away from the past appears as be a political necessity for starting over. Keeping in mind that the novels in my study are separatist in nature, it would be challenging to make a clean separation without as strong a motivation that led to such a strict separation. The idea of being confined to a present state that is constantly revised and replotted can constitute a barrier to the imagination of real or sustainable change. In the end, gender separatist feminist-aiming utopian plots most of the time end up in a cycle that consists in an initial oppressive state, followed by some form of destruction, followed by a new eutopian vision and application, which turns out to be dystopian due to the effects of the destruction and separation, ending with hints towards yet another destruction to cure the newly originated dystopian state.

Relevantly, one of Achterhuis' overarching critiques concerns Blochian wishful thinking. He argues that in utopian literature, broad social ideals are not discussed in-depth enough to be

[169] Ibid, 23.
[170] Ibid, 72.

considered within the paradigm of utopian thought.[171] For him, the notion that utopian thought is ubiquitous actually devalues and reduces the ambitions of utopian theory and practice. He is critical of the Blochian idea of utopian impulse as being pervasive. Responding to this attitude, Dutch sociologist and political scientist Merijn Oudenampsen, well-known for his critique of neoliberalism and conservatism, examines and criticizes Achterhuis' anti-utopianism in his article "In defence of utopia". In the article, he argues that Achterhuis has a limited and biased concept of utopianism. He concentrates on the assumptions that Achterhuis makes:

> Firstly, an all-or-nothing approach to utopian thought. Achterhuis rejects the idea that utopia could serve as an unattainable ideal, an inspiration to guide action. On the contrary, he maintains there is a single, unitary utopian tradition that departs from the idea that utopia is realizable. Utopia is a detailed blueprint that must be implemented in its entirety: the utopian tradition rejects the reformism that improves elements of society or applies loose ideas.[172]

Oudenampsen emphasizes, much in the line of Bloch, that utopian thought and practice can constitute a guide, an inspiration, a motivation, and an ideal. However, in the reading of Oudenampsen whether a blueprint is followed or the blueprint is realized should not necessarily determine the necessity, futility, or success of utopian thought. He reminds us that there are utopian traditions that value reform over radical uprooting of the existing system. While Achterhuis criticizes utopianism on the assumption that it is radical action that aims at perfection and fails, Oudenampsen believes that there is potential for growth and progress in utopian thinking, regardless of the outcomes of the utopian action. Even if radical destruction fails to

[171] Ibid, 16.
[172] Oudenampsen, "In Defence of Utopia," 9.

produce the desired outcome of a eutopian existence that has all the subjects leading satisfactory lives and that has all the institutions functioning as they should, every seemingly imperfect attempt contributes to the collection of experiences that supports sustainable positive outcomes for that society in the future. If the cycle of destruction and rebirth, whether on a large scale or small, is the driving force behind utopian thought, according to Oudenampsen, this cycle does not negate possible improvements. He underlines the idea that utopianism is a theory in motion, not a static one that aims to achieve a traditional idea of perfection.

The discussion between Achterhuis and Oudenampsen necessitates a reflection on the work of Bloch (dealt with in my chapter on hope). Bloch had a poetic way of writing, especially in his famous *The Principle of Hope* where he introduced his ideas on utopianism, hopeful thinking, and the not-yet-become. The passage below from his *The Spirit of Utopia* reveals that his so-called "ubiquitous" utopian thinking is not that ubiquitous:

> The look forward becomes even more powerful the brighter it becomes aware of itself. The dream in this look becomes quite clear, and the presentiment, being the right one, will be obvious. Only when reason starts to speak, then hope, which has nothing false to it, will begin to blossom again. The not-yet-conscious itself has to become *conscious* of its own doings; it must come to *know* its contents as restraint and revelation. And thus the point is reached where hope, in particular, the true effect of expectation in the dream forward, not only occurs as an emotion that merely exists by itself, but is *conscious and known* as the *Utopian function.*[173]

Bloch mentions that the "look forward," the hope, and the wishful thinking become more powerful, concrete, and practical "only when reason starts to speak." Therefore, his notion that

[173] Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 105.

utopian wishful thinking is ubiquitous is grounded on the expectation that wishful thinking will become reflective, that is, "conscious" and "aware" at large. Only then it will start to grow into a utopian function when the steps to take will be within the limits of reason. In my assessment, Bloch's ideas on the ubiquity of utopian thought are oversimplified and easily dismissed as empty and broad wishful thinking, as Achterhuis does. However, finding utopian ideas in all hopeful and wishful thinking does not necessarily mean that there are no concrete and practical applications and expectations possible. More in line with Oudenampsen, I hold that the utopian potential resides both in the projection of utopian hope and in its concrete applications.

The discussion between blueprint versus process utopias and the one between ubiquitous utopianism versus anti-utopianism is a valuable one that emphasizes the theoretical importance of critical and open-ended utopias. There are also gender separatist utopian novels in which both sides of the comparison exist together and in which the exploration of such concepts of hope is the main goal. In the following, I explore why I believe hope and failure can co-exist in this subgenre in a constructive manner.

Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country*, written in 1988, is a post-apocalyptic novel in which the women in power end up creating a dystopia while aiming to create a utopia. Three hundred years after a devastating nuclear war precipitated by men, the known world is centered around women's cities such as Marthatown and Sallytown. Outside the walls of these cities, there are garrisons of men who live as warriors. Women survive via a network of local communities where goods and services are exchanged through traveling caravans. With walls surrounding these cities, these women separate their space from that of men. The women harbor a relentless suspicion of men with their assumed tendency to devastate the world with wars, as is proven by events in the past. In their separate worlds, the women's sphere is the heart of science, art, and technology. Men have to become part of a garrison fraternity where physical exercise and fighting are the way of living. Not allowed to have books, a non-military education, or to

socialize with women, men live in exile, away from the comforts of the women's cities. When women have male babies, they are given to the garrison at the age of five and these boys choose either to live among women or men at the age of fifteen. Arbitrary wars against other garrisons of sister cities are planned and executed to keep the men alert, giving the warriors a purpose in life. Even though there is hope in the beginning, the novel does not end on a hopeful note. This novel accommodates the opposing points of view of both Achterhuis and Oudenampsen as I will further demonstrate by means of some close readings.

In this dystopian novel, women's cities are governed by councils of women, acting as mothers of the community as well as strict leaders who keep reminding the citizens of the rules of the community. This corresponds to Achterhuis' aspect of doom-mongering as one of the ways the utopian spirit is kept alive. It also happens to be one of the methods the council of women uses in order to make sure that all the women subjects of their community abide by the rules at all times. In the passage below, Morgot, the leader of the governing council of this utopian space, share her rationale for why the ceremonies hold societal significance:

> "We all have to do things we don't want to do," Morgot had said. "All of us here in Women's Country. Sometimes they are things hurt us to do. We accept the hurt because the alternative would be worse. We have many reminders to keep us aware of that. The Council ceremonies. The play before summer carnival. The desolations are there to remind us of pain, and the well is there to remind us that the pain will pass."[174]

The new generation of women is raised with the intimidation that "the alternative would be worse." This notion is repeatedly presented as a reminder for the subjects to be obedient. The

[174] Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country*, 12.

doom-mongering effect of reminding the painful past as a warning functions to protect the separatist utopia from disintegrating and keeps the women away from the men. To that effect, the men are portrayed as the others who are culpable and monstrous, those to be feared, avoided and kept at bay.

While this is a gender separatist novel with a dark plot, there is still some hope that shines through, as Oudenampsen would emphasize. In the passage below, the leader of the women explains why they continue to adhere to their principles and how they do not get disheartened by perceived failures:

> As for the rebellion, we have known about it since it began. Women's Country has been here for three hundred years, Septemius. How long could we have survived if we had not known about rebellions? How many rebellions do you think there have been? Every decade, every score of years there is a rebellion. Some faction in a garrison begins to feel aggrieved. Some group of women begin to play the fool. Rebellions! They begin like a boil, swelling and pustulent, and we let them grow until they come to a head. Then we lance them, and there is pain, and the swelling goes down. Until next time.[175]

Rebellion of the warriors against the women is one of many incidents that the leaders keep secret from the community of women. Such incidents work to undermine the women's trust in the leaders and might cause them to break the rules and socialize with the warriors.

Here, on the one hand, approached from the perspective of the leaders, they may succeed in keeping these painful incidents private and continue to work towards their goal of utopia. There is an element of hopeful thinking in that choice. On the other hand, the warriors rebel

[175] Ibid, 290.

against the women in an attempt to break free from the dystopia in which they are forced to live. This enables them to imagine their own utopia, as the women did, and perhaps not be confined within the walls of the garrison and lead a life of arbitrary wars. In this regard, from both sides of the opposite perspective, there is ubiquitous utopian thinking in the attempt to safeguard the newly established society and in the rebellions – both for women and for men.

In separatist utopian narratives, destruction resembles a reset function after which new realities can be imagined and then created. If destruction is taken as a negative occurrence by default, then the assumption would be that all utopias are doomed to fail. Seeing gender separatist feminist utopian novels as part of a broader constellation can facilitate finding solutions to common problems presented and explored not only in these novels but also in the eras when these novels were written. Each feminist utopian book has a limited reach and space by itself. However, when the subgenre is considered as a whole, plot elements in works of literature from different eras and contexts start to show certain patterns. In my reading, the destruction motifs and even dystopia itself can be considered constructive within the larger realm of feminist thought and literature. Most of the novels that I studied end with the clue that their eutopia is a bleak endeavor as more details come to the surface. They suggest that the eutopian entity as it currently is has to be challenged, disrupted, destroyed, and then rebuilt. This cycle of destruction and rebirth, which I ultimately consider to be constructive, is one of the central narrative motifs in the gynotopian subgenre.

Conclusion: The benefits of destruction in relation to the utopian motif

Destruction and cleansing before recreating the world is a required method of abolishing patriarchy and restarting the process of designing an ideal life that suits the needs and rights of women. To understand and validate the necessity of the destruction of patriarchy, I would like to remind the reader of what marks it. Gerda Lerner, who was one of the pioneer sociologist

historians in the field of researching and teaching women's history, defines patriarchy in *The Creation of Patriarchy* as follows:

> Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources.[176]

In her definition of patriarchy, Lerner mentions the full-scale institutionalization of male dominance over "society in general" and the nuclear family. In this context, Lerner sees the nuclear family as the bedrock of patriarchal dominance that oppresses women. At this point, I find the literary and by implication imaginary motif of destruction an effective one to use because the act of destruction fulfills its purpose of overthrowing a male dominance over women that is total, from the depicted nuclear families to entire societies. The destruction is required to reduce crimes against women, children, and other marginalized groups, as well as make it possible to improve their quality of life. Importantly, Lerner's definition of patriarchy ends with the remark that women are not totally powerless; they have always had certain influences even though these seemed at times quite different and contrasting from those possessed by men. The act of destruction within plots of gender separatist utopian novels and also the act of rewriting the narrative of society itself, support Lerner's assertion that women are not powerless subjects under patriarchy.

[176] Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 239.

In the novels I studied, patriarchy is a system that is so far-reaching in its influence and dominance that acts of reform cannot instigate sustainable change for marginalized and oppressed groups. The novels present patriarchy as a sociopolitical and economic system that is so rigid that only its destruction can cure the world of its strong and overbearing hold. Patriarchy is not only the primary root of women's subjugation but also a large factor that affects the lives of men and anyone who is forced to exist and survive under its rigid constellation. In order to maintain "the rule of the father," the metanarratives of specific gender roles are kept in place, emphasized by the legal, social, economic, and familial institutions under its discretion. Even though patriarchy has been challenged in some parts of the world, and even though there are considerable improvements in many countries, the reach of patriarchy is as strong as ever in the eras of the novels. This is why the novels imagine their alternative so radically.

This leaves us with the question of the frequent recurrence of a dystopian reality after the previous system has been destroyed. Some thinkers, such as the Trinidad and Tobago-born British sociologist and utopian scholar Krishan Kumar, argue that the seemingly dystopian motif of destruction points towards a decline in the prevalence of utopian thought. He believes that one of the main reasons why utopian thought is in decline is that utopian novels abandon their concern for society as a whole to instead concern themselves with personal emotions in a dystopian context.[177] He wonders, consequently, how it would be to experience the loss of utopian thought and then contends this would imply a static state. In his reading, human beings, having quite a mastery of their existence but suffering a loss of utopian ideals and development, are left to blind fate without any dreams of improving their lives.[178] I do not expect this bleak fate to ever befall feminist utopian thought. I rather agree with Sarah LeFanu who states that "there is a hidden utopian streak in these dystopian novels by women. They contain an element

[177] Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, 421.
[178] Ibid, 424.

of hopefulness that rests on a belief in the power and efficacy of women's speech."[179] The hidden utopian element in dystopian novels by women is embedded, that is, in the manifestation of the worst-case scenarios. These scenarios can give awareness to readers and inspire them to become politically conscious and active. Furthermore, visualizing and blueprinting new worlds, whether in fiction or in real life, constitutes a big part of how oppressed and marginalized people connect with each other and form supportive groups. Even a dystopian narrative and a plot or blueprint that rests on the destruction motif can bring women together so that they can create lasting change.

Destroying patriarchy is an imaginary act of resistance that lies at the heart of the destruction motif in gender separatist novels. This act of resistance is actualized and supported by forming an alliance against a common enemy. North American feminist and abolitionist scholar bell hooks focused on the intersection of gender studies, critical race theory, and anti-capitalism in her transformative and subversive work. Her call to action below provides a relatable indication of the motivation behind the act of destruction, in its potential to gather in solidarity, and to imagine an act of rebirth:

> Women are the group most victimized by sexist oppression. As with other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo. Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are "natural" enemies, that solidarity will

[179] LeFanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, 75.

> never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood.[180]

Breaking free from sexist oppression is first and foremost an incentive driving the imaginary destruction of the current status quo and the possible creation of a eutopian space. The reason behind the necessity for destruction is, in line with the argument of hooks above, that this overarching oppression is perpetuated by the subtly or obviously reaching hands of patriarchy. The inconspicuous and ubiquitous nature of this oppression makes it so that neither women nor men have a simple way of escaping its complex and ingrained structure. Moreover, within this structure, there is also the heteronormative narrative that women are each other's enemies and that they have to fight each other to gain the attention and affection of men. This narrative is supported by the gender roles that are forced on society and rewarded by the holy grail of the perceived supremacy of forming a nuclear family. In response to the both explicit and subconscious indoctrination involved, radical feminist sisterhood and separatist feminist utopianism can help unlearn the metanarratives of patriarchy and build a sustainable feminist movement that exists in solidarity. In my reading, it is the "true meaning and value of Sisterhood" that can be observed in gender separatist novels. Here, the first step of an imaginary destruction is required in order to step away from the sexist oppression and indoctrination that comes with patriarchy.

In conclusion, destruction turns out to be a necessary narrative archetype in feminist gender separatist utopian (dystopian or eutopian) literature. As I have argued in this chapter, the didactic warning inherent in dystopias acts as a hopeful utopian element where destruction is

[180] hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 43.

welcomed as a necessary act of cleansing. Destruction is not a solution but part of a cycle, as it is possibly followed by a *tabula rasa* state, which then leads to another oppressive society that in turn requires yet another destruction. This narrative cycle provides the tools with which the authors and their audiences can imagine different realities. Imagining these, the destruction motive, as suggested above, relates intrinsically to another motif: that of the clean slate or the *tabula rasa*. This is the central theme that is explored in the next chapter.