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

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Conclusion: Cruel utopianism and acts of recovery

Feminist utopian literature has expressed the reimagination and manifestation of how a world without patriarchy or explicitly without men would create a different manner of relating and existing. This dissertation is focused specifically on the subgenre of gender separatist utopian literature where women and men are separated into different living spaces under the control of different sociopolitical institutions based largely on notions of biological essentialism. I evoked the specific narratological cycle of hope, destruction, and rebirth in the form of *tabula rasa* in these gender separatist utopian works of literature. I set out to examine the expression of optimistic discourse in which the main action begins with hope and then leads to destruction, which inspires a rebirth with a desire to start from scratch and often continues with hope for even a better utopia, which will again require some form of destruction to undo and redo. Motivated by the realization that there had actually been various utopian narrative works prior to Thomas More's *Utopia*, I selected some works of literature from the medieval ages to the twenty-first century through a specifically feminist emancipatory lens. With these works of literature, I concentrated on interrogating the gender relations and utopian world-building practices within this utopian subgenre.

In Chapter I, I explored hope as an incentive for the creation and expression of gender separatist and feminist utopian spaces. In this chapter, I examined the intersection of feminist theory, practice, and fiction in the context of feminist utopianism. I looked for the expression and function of hope not only in traditional but also in unconventional works of feminist utopian literature. In Chapter II, I illustrated the motivation behind the destruction motif which often motivated the rebuilding phase in gender separatist utopian novels. I challenged the types of destruction that help women break free from fundamentally patriarchal structures and traditions. This radical act of destruction appeared as a phase of cleansing. In Chapter III, I discussed the

concept of tabula rasa as an attempt to achieve a clean slate. This phase acts as the almost completely free realm of exploration and creation of a feminist utopian space. I concentrated on the notion of tabula rasa as a space to explore the controversy of history versus herstory. Consequently, this “scraped tablet” turns out to be an uncleanable slate with evidence of usage that can be cleaned but cannot be erased. Realizing that the clean slate has actually been compromised, the utopian communities experience a form of disillusionment that fuels the period of reevaluation and new decisions toward the unreachable horizon.

My main question in this dissertation concerned, as mentioned before, how the narrative cycle of hope, destruction, and rebirth affects the literary repercussions on the subgenre of gender separatist utopian literature. I focused on how this cycle relates to the literary form, and how the stylistic and thematic aspects of the subgenre interact with feminist utopian literary theory. The diversity within feminist utopian thought and utopian literary studies drew my attention to the self-reflexivity of the subgenre which emphasized one fundamental aspect of it: that it is always in evolution and never intends to reach a static phase of perfection.

In addition to my central question, when I ask how female subjectivity relates to the problem of history and how the female subject sees her role in relation to her sociopolitical context and identity, the pattern of recovering a feminist literary history is revealed. With the popularization of under-researched feminist utopian works, a utopian tradition older than expected meets the eye. The body of feminist literature forgotten, underestimated, and understudied because they were simply written by women, provokes a desire for the recovery of a women’s utopian literary herstory among the male-written and -dominated utopian literary field. This act of recovery involves two distinct layers: firstly, the redemption of an overlooked feminist utopian literary history, and secondly, the broader implications of this fictional recovery on the domain of women’s utopian history as a whole.

In conclusion, I see a subgenre caught in transition. In the body of literature in this dissertation, the strict adherence to the gender binary aids the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination and hierarchy, while also erasing the existence of non-binary, non-cis, and trans existence. The tension of the separation causes inter-gender conflict. The gender reversal does not nullify the imbalanced power structures that surface in worlds dominated by men as well as women. When these gender separatist utopias enter a stage of disillusionment with their utopian project, the tension caused by gender separatism gives way to the perceived failure of the gender essentialist world. However, this type of failure is one that is necessary for the cycle of utopian creation and re-creation. It is this constant revision that benefits the intersection of feminist and utopian theory and practice. While gender essentialist notions intervene in trying to portray a common human nature among all women and all men, the binary separation of men versus women erases the recognition of a gender-free, gender-fluid, or transgender existence. These works of literature aim to recover a forgotten utopian feminist literary history, while the future is genderless. However, this does not make the subgenre incompatible with the overarching goals of gender emancipation or feminist utopianism. It provides a different perspective into common issues.

In the end, the novels in this subgenre also portray that there cannot be any universal utopia that can fulfill everyone's desires. I want to go back to Hans Achterhuis who criticizes this hypocritical duality of utopias: The purity of the utopians exists by the grace of others who are 'unclean,' who do the dirty work for them. He states that the whole of Utopia is based on the opposition between 'us' and 'them', between citizens and outsiders.²⁴⁰ Therefore, the clash between communities of women and men, thus between complementary but conflicting elements, underscores the relevance of the utopian and dystopian realms within the novels. Since

²⁴⁰ Achterhuis, *De erfenis van de utopie*, 78. Original text: "De zuiverheid der Utopiërs bestaat bij de gratie van anderen die 'onrein' zijn, die de vuile werkjes voor hen opknappen. Heel Utopia is gebaseerd op de tegenstelling tussen 'wij' en 'zij', tussen de burgers en de buitenstaanders."

there cannot be one common human nature, the existence of one perfect utopia for everyone is unrealistic. On this note, Ruth Levitas argues that all utopias make a statement about human nature. Since the needs and traditions of a society will change not only by gender but also by geographical and geopolitical conditions as well, human nature reveals itself as a socially and contextually constructed phenomenon; not a universal concept. She states that systems may contain conflicting elements among people, which can support utopian as well as anti-utopian reactions to totalitarianism.²⁴¹ The emphasis on defining human nature comes from the desire “to legitimize the particular social arrangements prescribed.”²⁴² Consequently, there can be no universal utopia but only essentialist utopias acting as universal ones, where conflict breeds new forms of destruction and then new patterns of rebirth.

In order to outline the rich herstory of the subgenre of gender separatist feminist utopian literature, I have looked at its most common foundational narrative elements. The usage of the concept of *tabula rasa* as a metaphor for a new beginning is central to the creation of new feminist eutopian spaces. An act of destruction in the past becomes the crucial plot element that makes the concept of *tabula rasa* possible in the first place. This state of metaphorical blank state is central to the creation of the feminist utopias in these literary works. Consequently, the act of destruction is presented as a means of justification for the establishment of a new and hoped-to-be better community. The destruction serves as a symbolic gesture that signifies the rejection and subsequent abandonment of the pre-existing traditional gender roles and societal structures. In other words, the destruction becomes the framework that emphasizes the urgency of abandoning the old ways in favor of a feminist eutopian alternative.

In addition to the motif of destruction that enables the rebuilding of the utopian society, the strong portrayal of the dystopian traits of the past as warnings for the future contributes to

²⁴¹ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 213.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 214.

the complexity of the narrative. The new community is forewarned about the potential shortcomings of its people through the preservation of the memory of the dark past. This cautionary aspect of gender separatist feminist utopian literature serves many roles in the plots: a guiding force, a stabilizing presence, a protective layer against a new possible destruction and a moral compass. This cautionary tale of destruction influences the evolution of the community and shapes its collective identity.

In these examples of feminist utopian literature, history is not entirely erased. This is evident in the fact that the communal experience and knowledge of the destroyed past persist in the present in different ways. This knowledge and experience of the past is stored in the collective memory of the newly established communities, either explicitly through documented records or implicitly through shared narratives and cultural practices. This historical awareness and the meta-awareness it creates for the readers becomes a foundational narrative element. Furthermore, this notion helps shape the identity of the community and influence its evolution. This collective memory also serves as a collection of lessons and provides a reference point for the community.

One of the most important reasons why gender separated communities end up feeling disillusioned from the separatist utopian ideals is that separatism has proven to be practically impossible. The women's communities in literature physically separate themselves from men, but not from patriarchy or misuse of power in general. This creates tensions among both women and men because some of them wish to join communities, while others cling to the traditional idea that men are to be avoided due to their assumed and perceived aggressive nature. In other works of literature, the separation is caused by biological and/or natural catastrophes such as epidemics, meteor strikes, and earthquakes, which makes an allusion to the supposedly deep connection between women and nature. Feminist scholarship has examined matriarchy as a social and political structure that differs from patriarchy in terms of not only gender in particular

but also how they do politics in general. Nonetheless, the matriarchal administrations in many examples in literature resemble a strict patriarchal system but with only women as leaders.

The disparity between the actions, expectations, and reality in relation to the formation of a gender separated matriarchal utopian society is note-worthy. The actions that are expected to bring improvement and contentment to society can have outcomes that fail to fulfill this expectation. As I mentioned in Chapter I, Berlant's approach to cruel optimism is a fitting analogy to the narrative cycle of hope, destruction, and rebirth in the gender separatist novels I am researching. She focuses on the precarity that occurs following the desperation and violence that arise after the failure of capitalist good life promises, which are akin to utopian better life promises.²⁴³ As mentioned earlier, in her work *Cruel Optimism*, she argues that social theory has the task of answering the questions about the need for formal and informal institutions, and affective aspirations that could potentially support the ideals of the collective utopian ambitions of the good life.²⁴⁴ While the sociopolitical systems around us make good life promises such as sustainable income, health and healthcare services, recreation, personal development, environmental enrichment, and accessibility, precarity and disappointment usually follow due to the actions we take to reach these promises.

In the gender separatist works included in this dissertation, there is a strong desire to create a world that does not allow for the repetition of past mistakes because these mistakes are considered to have caused the destruction of their worlds. This desire to create a better world results in attempts at eliminating all possible risk factors that may cause atrocities similar to those in the past. This particularly high level of utopian micromanaging and blueprinting ends up creating a utopian world where the crimes of the past are eliminated, only to discover new horrors that originate in the conditions of the new utopian worlds. Thus the methods used to

²⁴³ "Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović." pp. 171.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

actualize the desire for a perfect feminist utopian world become an obstacle to the flourishing of the gender separatist utopian worlds. Even though Berlant is concerned with real-life situations in her discourse, the desire for the good life and the optimistic attachment to this desire, also in utopian literature, gets increasingly more difficult to abandon as the attachment to the optimistic outcome grows. As more effort and hope are immersed into the process of achieving optimistic aspirations, the loss that comes with the perceived failure of the good life will be greater. Berlant further argues that desires for betterment, which she calls optimistic relations, are not cruel by nature, but that they become cruel when the inherently optimistic attachment to these improvement projects and ideals impedes the desired progress and results. Berlant argues that optimism about such promises and aspirations of the good life may not always cater to the promised feeling of progress, positivity, or optimism.²⁴⁵

Similarly, in gender separatist utopian novels, the idea of the good life for women is at the center of the internal process of the subgenre; however, the realization that their utopia is not perfect or finalized creates the disillusionment that makes the characters question their decisions. This notion relates to the novels I am studying because the leading councils of women in the gender separatist utopian societies depend on the idea that separating the society based on assumed gender status and micromanaging the sociopolitical life of the society would, in turn, bring about peace, safety, and security. However, these well-meaning actions do not always provide the predicted positive outcomes and, more importantly, the harsh conditions brought about by these very actions cause society to stray further from the expected outcome. Peace, safety, and security start to feel like an unreachable shore, relating well to the spirit of ever-evolving utopianism.

The creative (the meta-process of writing the utopian text) and societal (the progress experienced by the society in the novels) journey undertaken in the gender separatist utopian

²⁴⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

community differ in certain ways that are not always linear. This lack of progress linearity is an inherent part of utopianism. The unfolding of utopian spaces is a process that includes moments that resemble failure and others that resemble elation, all of which form a cohesive whole that supports constant evolution with no closure. In the narrative structure of these works, this final moment of disillusionment is employed as a strategy to critique the separatist aspect of these specific feminist utopias/dystopias. This point of view leads us to the idea of disillusionment with the concept of utopia itself, self-preservation through separatism, and the possibility of personal and societal transformation. Berlant's work focuses on the outcome of the disillusionment from the optimistic relation once it becomes cruel. She defines this impasse as "a time of dithering from which someone or some situations cannot move forward."²⁴⁶ In gender separatist utopian works of literature, the readers encounter the impasse when the protagonists experience disillusionment by the end of the plot, as they realize that their supposedly utopian home is built upon many secrets and atrocities from the past. The impasse is realized when it becomes obvious that there is no turning back, and going forward would mean destroying what stands in front of progress, therefore feeding the cycle of cruel optimism.

This also relates to cruel utopianism in a sense because the sacrifices they make to reach an unreachable utopia end up making them look for yet another utopia. It is this never-ending nature of the process that negates the death of feminist utopia. In that regard, after centuries of writing about perfectly peaceful feminist utopias, it is no doubt that the trend has shifted towards framing utopianism through a popular narrative: catastrophes. This in turn makes me question the very definition of utopia again. In a recent interview in the *Oxford Political Review*,²⁴⁷ Claeys underlines that he is arguing in favor of "a realizable utopianism" by which he is

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 5.

²⁴⁷ See <https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2022/09/25/interview-with-gregory-claeys-utopianism-for-a-dying-planet/>

criticizing the ubiquitous utopian hope and everyday utopianism. He argues for a utopianism that is concretely theorizing, not abstractly hoping:

Utopia has a specific content, and is a social concept. Where hope is a synonym for faith, it is counterproductive and archaic. As mere hopium is merely dulls our sense of anxiety. It is pointless to say “we hope for a better world” or “a better world is possible” without specifying what we mean by these terms, and discussing the specific content of utopia.²⁴⁸

I acknowledge how the concept of hope can be both significant and elusive. Hope, in itself, does not guarantee specific outcomes; rather, it embodies the belief that the pursuit or process is inherently valuable and worth fighting for. However, in gender separatist feminist utopian literature, I find using utopian hope as a catalyst for dreaming and designing a eutopian space much more compatible with the ideals of feminist utopianism. As Bloch also underlines, this ubiquitous hope has to be “conscious” and “aware” – not a concept of empty hope that acts as blind faith.²⁴⁹

Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism and Levitas’ specific concept of utopia as method (of archaeological, ontological, and architectural) paved the way for me to find that the common narrative cycle in the gender separatist utopian literature in my thesis is eutopian and optimistic in and of itself despite the fact that their portrayal of the new world can feel dystopian for women and gender equality at large. Nonetheless, the works of literature in this subgenre aimed in good faith to create a women-only safe space.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 105.

Feminist utopianism situates itself apart from static blueprint utopianism. This principle is also in line with the multiplicity, intersectionality, and self-reflexivity of feminist utopianism. The act of leaving the static blueprint scheme of utopianism behind provides space to employ world-building narratives that explore a wide variety of co-existence between the spaces of women and men, and also within these gendered spaces themselves. Even when the stories start from the perspective of gender separatist feminism, the issues handled in these works of literature do not stay at the level of gender politics but delve into many intersecting aspects of life such as politics of work, education, societal collaboration, resourceful variants of alternative living, and military assurance. Despite creating women-only spaces, the fact that women oppress, control and even abuse other women and the fact that most of these literary texts end with disheartened tension expresses a self-reflexive critique within specific schools of feminist thought; in this case, radical feminism. Even though gender separatism has had its merits in certain contexts of safety and perseverance, the novels in my study show that separatism did not help communities build improved gender relations and a peaceful society. On the contrary, gender separatism was the reason for the disintegration or the disillusionment of their societies.

In conclusion, the cyclical nature of the narrative makes this subgenre eutopian at heart because the constant destruction and rebuilding for the betterment of society is the essence of utopianism. As anti-utopianists argue that the impossibility of perfection and the rigidity (even totalitarianism) of the regime make utopianism unrealistic and harmful. I find the impossibility of perfection one of the central and most valuable characteristics of utopianism. Gender separatist utopian literature emphasizes this utopian pattern of renewal with its common narrative cycle of hope, destruction, and rebirth. Ideally, utopia is never to be reached but always chased on the horizon.

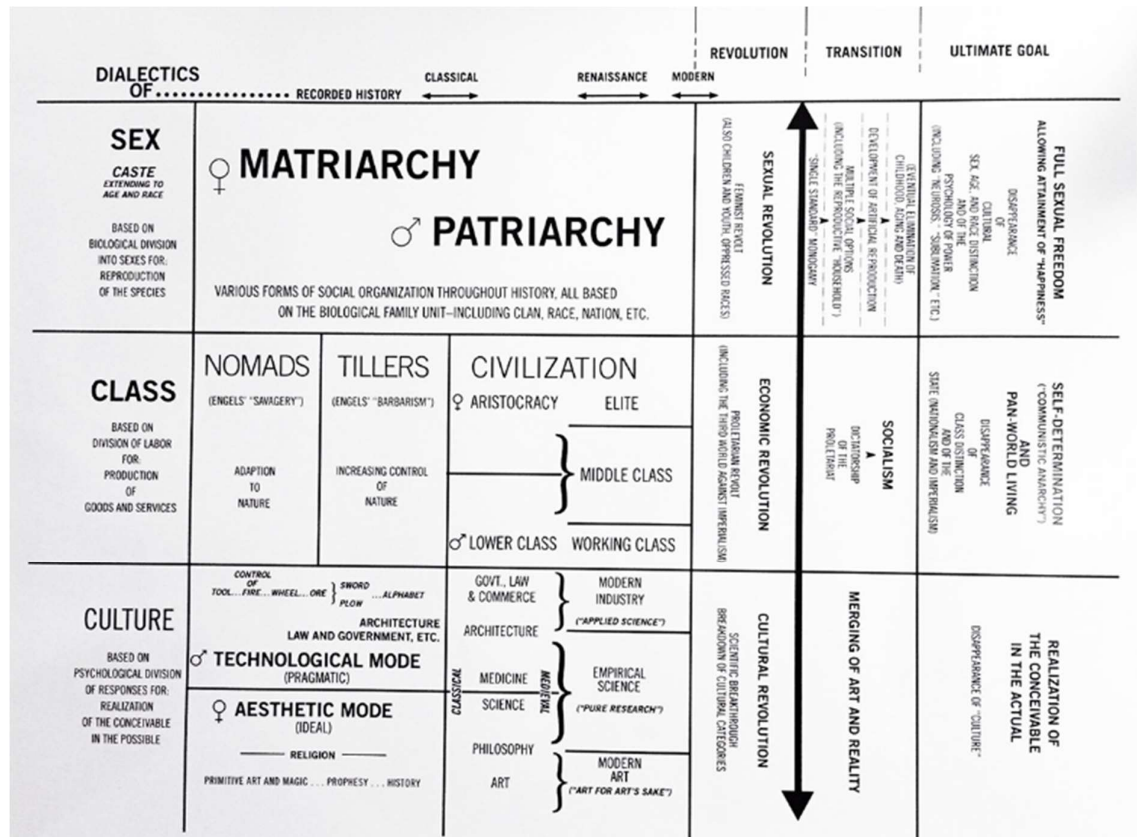
The recognition of women as a separate gender-based class underlines the multifaceted nature of societal structures. The unique challenges faced by women are therefore acknowledge.

This acknowledgement also shows that a singular utopia catering to everyone of the same gender is an unrealistic notion. Individuals will, irrespective of their gender, harbor a unique group of features that defy the probability of societal homogenization. Therefore, the pursuit of utopian blueprint of gender peace requires the understanding that the ideal fictional society needs to be diverse and adaptable in order to accommodate individual nuances of the broader context of gender identity.

While I make this statement, I am also fully aware of the fact that these constant and at times too subtle attacks on women's rights continue to confront women in many parts of the world to varying degrees. Some geographies are luckier than others in certain aspects; however, how far we have come in the women's rights movement cannot be taken for granted. This is also why I argue that we still need utopian hope and feminism for a better tomorrow.

I would like to end my dissertation with Shulamith Firestone's "diagram of the revolution" which was included in her book *The Dialectic of Sex*.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 6.



In this diagram, Firestone illustrates the categories of sex, class, and culture across the Classical, Renaissance, and Modern ages. She envisions three crucial revolutions to achieve the ultimate goals of the feminist revolution: the Sexual Revolution, the Economic Revolution, and the Cultural Revolution. These revolutions would lead to Full Sexual Freedom, Self-determination, and The Realization of the Conceivable in the Actual. Firestone uses this map to forge intersectional connections between class, culture, and sex, underscoring the potential for transformative change. This practice serves as a valuable tool for mapping the stages of a Marxist feminist revolution.

In order to recover their herstory and build their own utopia, women look to the past, gather hope for the future, destroy the present, and initiate a period of rebirth. It was my goal to dissect this act of recovery in gender separatist feminist utopian literature in my dissertation. First, I delved into the expression of hope in my corpus, examining how this hope is articulated

and how it motivates the eutopian spaces. I looked to establish a tradition of women-authored eutopias predating Thomas More's renowned *Utopia*. I observed the intersection of hope and the perceived death of utopia. Later I specifically concentrated on the motivation behind the destruction motif that came before the formation of the eutopian spaces. I noticed that this motif has served as a means of purging the world of the hardships faced by women in that community. Therefore, the concept of destruction has become a means of breaking away from the past that has come to shape the present. Thus, destruction becomes a necessary part of creation. I then shifted my focus to the concept of tabula rasa, which includes the examination of historiography, the reclamation of history, and the writing of herstory. Through a historical review of matriarchal societies, I examined the sociopolitical structures that are formed on the theoretical foundation of tabula rasa immediately after a form of destruction occurred. These structures start from destruction and arrive at tabula rasa, only to find a need for a better world. This need necessitates and creates hope as the fuel, thus the cycle of destruction continues. This cycle contributes to the crisis, chaos, disillusionment, and potentially paving the way for future ideas towards a better eutopia.

In the end, the literary tropes present in separatist feminist literature (such as those I examined; hope, destruction and rebirth) contribute to a rich literary tradition in feminist utopianism. These literary tropes act as a foundation for the exploration of the space between destruction, creation, memory, trauma and progress. The infinite pursuit of eutopia continues to exist in the subgenre of gender separatist feminist utopian literature.