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A Feminist Utopia and the Exclusion of Violence

Violence, Gender, and Genetics in *The Gate to Women's Country* by Sheri S. Tepper

Bachelor's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

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Abstract

There are a number of ways in which a feminist utopia can be constructed. This thesis aims to explore the ways in which Sheri S. Tepper's novel *The Gate to Women's Country* portrays a utopian society not by dividing the genders, but by excluding obvious traits of violence. This acts as the first of three research questions. It also explores the concept of violence, and the variety of forms violence can take by drawing on examples from the novel. These examples concern both whole communities and individual characters present in the society of Women's Country. Secondly, the thesis aims to answer the question of whether violence is gendered. Through an analysis the two characters of Myra and Chernon, it is concluded that violence is gendered in the sense that women are more likely to fall victim to violence than men, and also in the sense that men are more likely to be the perpetrator of violence than women are. The third question examined in this thesis is the one of whether or not violence is a genetic attribute. By examining studies based on sets of twins and adoptees, this thesis concludes that it is likely that violence is hereditary. However, it is still important to note that it is not the only determinant of violence. Considering the entirety, this thesis aims to explore the concept of utopia, violence, gender, and genetics in regard to *The Gate to Women's Country* by Sheri S. Tepper.

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Sheri S. Tepper's feminist speculative fiction novel *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) portrays a complex matriarchal society, which demonstrates how one can create utopia by excluding traits of violence. In the novel of *The Gate to Women's Country*, it is possible to reach a variations of conclusions. I intend to discuss these possible conclusions by exploring the concept of utopia and how the premise for a utopia changes based on for whom the utopia is made for. I will also be exploring the concept of violence, in regard to whole communities, namely the garrisons of Marthatown and Susantown, and how the battle between the two towns acts as an example for both collective violence and how the degree of harm can vary. Additionally, I will be examining the individual characters of Chernon and Myra. Chernon will act as an example of how violence is nourished through his environment, as well as how traits of violence can be considered genetic. The analysis of Myra will function as an example of how violence can be considered gendered, and I will also be discussing this character in accordance with how violence is hereditary. Through an in-depth analysis of the matriarchal society presented in the novel, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which Women's Country serves as a utopia by excluding blatant traits of violence. The main research questions of this thesis will be firstly; for whom the utopia in Women's Country is intended for, secondly; is violence gendered, and lastly; can attributes of violence be deemed as hereditary.

To be able to answer the first research question, I intend to define and discuss the concept of utopia. According to Collins Dictionary, utopia can be defined as "any real or imaginary society, place, state, etc., considered to be perfect or ideal". However, a utopian society is not as easily defined as it appears. It is important to consider for whom the society is perfect or ideal. In the case of the society portrayed in *The Gate to Women's Country*, a variety of conclusions could be drawn. When considering this female-dominated society and the concept of utopia, it can be worthwhile to study the connections between feminism and utopia. According to Stimpson, the connection is clear; feminism is in its essence utopian (Stimpson 2). She argues that equality for all, especially between the genders, is at the centre of both feminism and utopias. Although equality should be a priority for any utopian society, this is not always the case. Kasai argues that female writers tend to exclude men from their depicted utopian societies and states as follows:

Because patriarchy oppresses and marginalizes women, the natural impulse in envisioning alternative futures is to imagine its opposite in narratives that commonly

exclude, desexualize, or segregate men rather than portray harmonious cohabitation and social collaboration. (Kasai 1389)

Kasai even mentions the novel as one of the works that exemplifies a society in which women hold the power over reproduction or sexual gratification (1390). When considering Women's Country in accordance with this conceptualization, one could draw parallels. Men are segregated in the way that they are urged to stay in the garrison with the rest of the men, however, one should keep in mind that not all the men choose to stay. Some men choose to leave the garrison for Women's Country, where they are able to get an education and function as servants for the women. This is noteworthy as it shows that it is not by segregating men and women that they acquire a utopian society, it is rather by excluding the toxicity of violence. Female authors of science fiction often times exploit the irony of reversed sexual bias as natural, therefore painting men as inferior or limited within the stereotypical traits attributed to the male gender (Donawerth 542). When considering this, one could also argue that it is somewhat of a utopian society even for the men in the novel, as they get to live out the stereotypical "dream life" where honor and violence is at the centre. This is if we were to reduce the male gender to strictly violent qualities. It can also be useful to consider the likeliness of fact that it is not the wish of every woman that their male relatives stay in the garrison, it is mostly other men, peer pressure and the substantial focus on honor that encourage young boys to stay in the garrison. I want to exemplify this by including a passage from the book, in which the rhetoric used to pressure young boys into staying in the violent community outside the walls is explicitly explained:

Everyone agreed that it was dishonorable to return through the Gate to Women's Country. Only cowards did it. Cowards and physical weaklings, though even they could be put to work in the garrison kitchens or doing maintenance of some kind if they confessed their weakness to the Commander. Beyond being the butt of a bit of rough teasing or donkey play, they got on well enough. (Tepper 143)

There are two aspects of this I want to explore. Evidently, men who choose to leave their lives in the garrison behind are considered cowards. This is stated explicitly and does not require further investigation. It also becomes clear that the men in the garrison do not know the central role the male servants play within the walls of Women's Country. Not only do they function as servants for the women, but also father their children, which is revealed to the main character of the book, Stavia, at the very end of the novel (Tepper 283). The society in Women's Country is not utopian because they are mostly separated by gender, it is utopian because they eliminate blatant traits of violence. Nonetheless, I would like to explore why it is

that only men are allowed to join the garrison. This presents the issue of whether or not violence is gendered, which I will be returning to later in the thesis.

Further, I intend to explore the various forms of violence by drawing on events presented in the novel. There are a lot of instances in *Women's Country* where different forms of violence take place, both inside and outside the walls. Acts of violence can be performed as a collective as well as an individual person (a. Walby et al. 32). In *The Gate to Women's Country* there are a handful of examples of individual violence as well as violence executed by people in groups. An example from the novel where a community as a whole participates in acts of violence is the battle between Marthatown and Susantown, sparked by conflicting political interests, which is considered a common objective of collective violence (Rutherford et al. 677). Although this battle ultimately resulted in victory for Marthatown, they did end up losing almost a third of their warriors (Tepper 131). Considering their substantial loss as the winners of the battle, one can only imagine the extent of harm on Susantown's garrison. This acts not only as an example of how a group of people can perform violent acts against each other, but also an example of how the degree of harm can vary (a. Walby et al. 34).

The character of Chernon proves himself to be one of the most violent individuals within the novel of *The Gate to Women's Country*. This character is introduced when Stavia is only 10 years old, however their connection is noticeable from the start. It is also clear that this character is troublesome from the very beginning, which I will be discussing further. Firstly, I intend to address the event in which I would argue is the most violent act Chernon performed throughout the novel; when he sexually assaults Stavia. In the novel, Stavia describes the incident as what can only be understood as rape (Tepper 37). Sexual violence is a specific form of violence, in which rape is a subdivision of (b. Walby et al. 71). This happened despite the fact that Stavia had already expressed her affection for him prior to the trip where the assault took place (Tepper 193). The reason Chernon chooses to force himself on another person is not explicitly explained. However, there are various aspects of the character which can have had an impact on why he chose to do as he did. I am going to explore specific events which may have had an affect on Chernon's character by using literature based on mainly domestic violence and gender.

As an overall reason, I would argue that Chernon acts out of innate traits of misogyny. From an early age, the violent traits inhabited by Chernon were noticeable. An early sign of his misogyny took place when young Chernon called his own mother "ugly, terrible things" when visiting home for the carnival (21). This was urged by one of the older warriors and was not Chernon's own words. However, I would argue that this only triggered a

side of Chernon which was waiting to be unleashed, as he would have to be somewhat receptive to the warrior's influence. As mentioned earlier, the garrison idolizes the male gender, masculinity, and honor. Anderson and Umberson argues the binary framework of the male gender can only survive in environments where it is welcomed and nourished (359). The environment is nourished by both those within the group as well as the women in Women's Country, however, they support the group through different approaches. Chernon's admiration for the garrison is motivated by pride, and possibly some inherent traits which is complimentary to the life of the garrison.

Acts of violence is not always physical; it can also be psychological (a. Walby et al. 33). There were occurrences of psychological violence perpetrated by Chernon that took place before the sexual assault happened, which can be understood as foreshadowing of his capabilities for violence. Chernon is being utilized as an infiltrator to gain knowledge about the society within the walls of Women's Country, per the commands of higher ranked within the garrison, (Tepper 65). By getting acquainted with Stavia, he manages to sway her into breaking the ordinances by providing him with literature. When Stavia ultimately refuses to give him more books, Chernon in turn grows enraged and stops all communication with her (Tepper 150). This proves to have an impact on her mental state for years the following years. He does not only get angry with her, but he also grows resentful towards both her and ordinances of Women's Country (Tepper 187). This can be understood as a contempt for the women within the society as a whole, as the ordinances are more or less all Chernon knows about Women's Country. The contempt of the ordinances is described as a 'ritual' in Chernon's headspace, which implies that him feeling resentful for the laws is a common occurrence. Over time, this could have an affect on his general opinion of women. Additionally, how he speaks of the women he meets during the season of the carnival implies a perspective in which women are lesser than men and not only can but should be used as nothing more than an object of gratification (Tepper 193). It is probable that this misogynistic attitude has been cultivated through his participation in the garrison.

After the event of the sexual assault, Chernon shifts the blame on Stavia, by asking her what else she "expected him to do" (Tepper 238). According to Anderson and Umberson, the concept of blaming the victim is common within partner-violence (367). Although the cases studied in this research paper mainly concerns specific incidents of domestic violence, I do find it relevant to the case of Stavia and Chernon, as the violence between them correlates with the definition of domestic violence, namely violence between romantic partners (Rutherford 677). As Chernon has grown up in the garrison, and hardly had any female role

models in his life, it is likely that he bases his views concerning the opposite gender or men with female attributes on the perspective of those higher ranked in the garrison. Social isolation is likely to lead to a type of tunnel vision as to what is right and wrong (Anderson 656). It is therefore a handful of leading causes as to why Chernon grew up to be the man he is. These causes concern mainly environmental impacts, and not the possible genetic explanation which I will be discussing later in the thesis.

Further, I aim to examine another character in the novel who offers a different, yet similar perspective on violence in the novel, namely Myra. Tepper portrays the older sister of Stavia as a young woman of many emotions and traits of defiance. All the way from her years as a teenager to her years as a mother, it is evident that Myra and Stavia do not share the same view on violence and the garrison in itself. Whilst Stavia denounces the acts of the garrison towards returnees, Myra clearly supports them being battered based on honor and image alone (Tepper 25). What is unusual about Myra as a mother, compared to other mothers in Women's Country, is that she not only expects her son to stay in the garrison, but she wishes for it (Tepper 88). She acknowledges the violence of the warriors as honorable, whilst most women in Women's Country recognizes the garrison as at best necessary. It is not only her values which can be deemed as complimentary to those of the garrison, but also her way of being. This is implied by one of the men who lives as a servant in Women's Country:

Myra should have been born a man. She could have joined the garrison and been perfectly happy. She's like the warriors, living from carnival to carnival, game to game, and war to war, telling herself romances about honor and glory in between. (Tepper 180).

This shows that she is a woman with innate characteristics similar to the men of the garrison, in addition to having admiration for them. Although Myra is not a directly physical violent person, her turbulent behavior and support for the garrison may indicate some innate violent traits. I therefore return to the second research question; whether or not violence is restricted by gender. According to Anderson, women are as likely to perform acts of violence against their partner as their male opposite (656). In the larger sense of the term, however, Ruby argues that men are the principal perpetrators of violence by far, including physical assaults, sexual assaults, murder, and war crimes (22). She continues to stress the male-pattern evident in statistics of violence, which is evident in the novel of *The Gate to Women's Country* as well. This is not to say that women do not perform acts of violence at all, but that there is a clear pattern of male perpetration. Additionally, Ruby stresses the differences between violence executed by men in relation to women. Female-pattern violence is often times

characterised by acts of self-defence (23). This is also evident in the novel, as the events of violence perpetrated by women are in self-defence. Although women are among the most affected in large-scale violence, it is not to say that they are solely the victims of violence; men are often times part of the casualties as well (Hvistendal 839). In *The Gate to Women's Country*, they have contradicted this real-life statistic by creating a utopia for women in which violence almost never affects them directly.

Returning to Anderson, they argue that it is not only important to consider how much harm the violence may cause, but also how structural powers tend to protect the perpetrator of the violence instead of the victim (657). There are significant differences between the degree of harm caused by female violence compared to violence executed by men. In regard to the novel, however, the structural powers are different. The matriarchal society presented in *The Gate to Women's Country* focuses on how to allow violence without harming those who are biologically less likely to cause significant harm, therefore creating a society which can be considered utopian for the women of the society. The character of Myra is less adaptable to manage what she may feel are 'restrictions' within the wall, not being able to fully act upon her violent traits, whilst Chernon is perfectly adaptable to the society of the garrison. From this, I conclude that that violence is gendered in the sense that women are often times the victims, and that men are more likely to be the perpetrator.

Further, I will be exploring the relationship between Myra and Chernon. Myra being a female example of violence in *Women's Country* is not the only connection between her and Chernon. Towards the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the connection between the two characters is more than just their support for the garrison. As it is revealed to Stavia that it is the men within the walls who father the children, it is also revealed that the two sisters do not share the same father. Instead, the likelihood that Chernon and Myra share the same father is revealed (Tepper 293). It is explained that almost none of the children this man fathered returned home from the garrison, and it can therefore be deducted a possible genetic explanation. Before exploring the concept of violence as something genetic, and addressing the third research question in this thesis, I would like to lay the premise of this discussion. Although the society in *The Gate to Women's Country* is within a fictional universe, it is likely the biological basis is mostly the same as in real life. I would also like to preface that most of the secondary sources are based on twin/adoptees studies, however, as the male children of Women's Country are raised in a similar manner to those who are adopted, I would argue that there are similarities to be drawn.

According to DiLalla and Gottesman, a child is more likely to commit a crime if their biological parent has a criminal record (126). They are even more likely if both their biological and their adoptive parent has a criminal background. However, the results of whether or not they are more likely to perform a violent crime is less clear. Higher levels of testosterone have shown to have an impact on behaviour (DiLalla & Gottesman 127). This is only in relation to studies of male adolescents and is therefore not entirely conclusive in the case of Myra. However, as I have mentioned earlier in the thesis, it is likely that violence is gender-based in the way that it is restricted by societal structure and the degree of harm that is possible; meaning that it is possible Myra would have been more expressive in her violence had she not been restricted by her environment. Similarly to the study conducted by DiLalla and Gottesman, the study on sets of twins by Alsobrook and Pauls attempt to answer the same question. In this study, the data analysed concludes that there is no shared environmental influence on their behaviour between the sets of twins (Alsobrook & Pauls 768). Neither are there any certain gene or genes that will lead to traits of violence either. However, by looking at the phenotypes of both the sets of twins and the adoptees, they conclude that it is likely that specific genes will contribute to the increase of risk for the expression of violent traits (Alsobrook & Pauls 774). Both studies conclude by stating that although violent traits cannot be deemed as inherently biological, it is likely that genetics does have an impact on the psychological and hormonal aspect which triggers tendencies of violence. It can therefore be said that it is likely that some of the violent traits found in Myra and Chernon can be deemed as hereditary.

In conclusion, I will return to the research questions stated in the introductory paragraph. Firstly, I will be addressing the one of for whom the society of Women's Country is created for. If one were to analyse the society presented in *The Gate to Women's Country* from the stance of a man in the society, it is not likely that one would consider it a utopian society. This is unless one does subscribe to the idealization of the normative binary framework of the male gender, in which case it can most definitely consider it a utopia where violence, male-domination and masculine traits being valued. However, I have argued that the societal utopia in Women's Country essentially serves the female citizens of the society.

Secondly, I return to the question of whether or not violence is gendered. I have argued that violence is gendered in the way that women are more than often the victims of violence, both in domestic cases of violence and in collective violence. In the case of Women's Country, however, the women have created a structural power in which they are hardly affected by collective forms of violence. Violence is also gendered in the sense that it is more than likely a

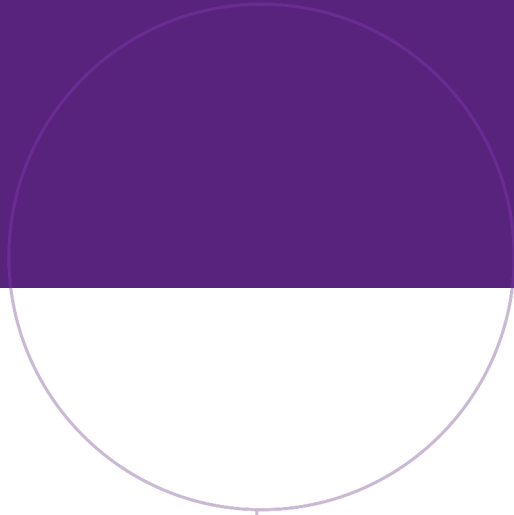
man perpetrating the violence, rather than a woman. This remains true in Women's Country, as in real life.

Thus, I return to the third and last question; can attributes of violence be deemed as hereditary? I have argued that although it is not a scientific certainty, based on the novel and the fact that Myra and Chernon share the same biological father, it is highly likely that their shared attributes can be considered hereditary traits. I have also argued that Chernon can be deemed as one of the most violent characters within the novel. Throughout the novel, there are a multitude of instances where Chernon expresses these violent tendencies, both by causing physical and psychological harm to the main character Stavia. It is likely that his violent tendencies stem from both his upbringing in the garrison and his ancestral heritage, being the son of a man whose children hardly ever return to Women's Country. Chernon is therefore an example of both how blatant traits of violence is gendered and how violence can be considered a genetic attribute.

A feminist utopia can be constructed in a number of ways. I have argued that Tepper's novel *The Gate to Women's Country* is an excellent example of a feminist utopia where the structural powers are both created by and for women. It is however, not necessarily a classic one. The novel coincides with a handful of other feminist utopias in the way that it plays into the irony of male as the "weaker" or "lesser" gender. This is done by segregating men within the normative understanding of the male role in society, namely being the protector of women by using violence. Instead of portraying a society in which women and men are segregated, Tepper portrays a society in which the main differentiator is the innate violence in the male gender.

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