



## **Exploration of the intersection of Historical-Critical Analysis and Feminist theory in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland***

**Aqsa Tariq**

Namal University, Mianwali, Email: [aqsa.tariq@namal.edu.pk](mailto:aqsa.tariq@namal.edu.pk)

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#### **Corresponding Author:**

**Aqsa Tariq,**  
Lecturer in English,  
Namal University,  
Mianwali

#### Email:

[aqsa.tariq@namal.edu.pk](mailto:aqsa.tariq@namal.edu.pk)

### **ABSTRACT**

This research paper focuses on the intersection of feminist theory and historical-critical analysis in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Both novels illuminate the struggles of women for identity and autonomy in the patriarchal societies and challenging the gender norms. Through employing the historical-critical methodologies, the current study situates the novels within their social and cultural contexts through highlighting the pressure of contemporary social reform and gender politics movements. Simultaneously, the feminist theory is used to critically analyze the narratives' demonstration of resistance and female agency. The results demonstrate how both writers envision the alternative spaces for women empowerment. This interdisciplinary and intersectional approach provides a nuanced concept of how *The Awakening* and *Herland* reflect the greater historical shifts.

### **1) Introduction**

Every text has a historical origin i.e. a place and time in which it is written. Historical criticism aims at looking at texts from a broader perspective, especially by focusing

on the cultural events that were occurring when the text was written. Multiple aspects are connected to it including the lifestyle of that specific period, the culture and ideology of that time and place, and the events occurred. The best example of Historical criticism is the analysis of the holy book, the Bible (Crawford & Wasserman, 2025). Through its historical-critical analysis, the world became aware of Western Civilization. The feminist theory is another famous theory in literature that will be used in this research to analyze the texts from a feminist perspective. Analysis of gender inequality has been of major significance in the field of literature (Butler, 2025). Feminist theory focuses on the analysis of this gender inequality in light of patriarchy, objectification, and discrimination. The theories of feminism are diverse. There is multiracial feminism, radical feminism, and liberal feminism.

The intersectional approach is significant as it would help in analyzing and reading experiences of women from a multidimensional perspective which theory is unable to capture alone. While Feminist theory helps in foregrounding women's agency and gendered power systems, historical-critical theory situates the both novels in their socio-cultural contexts. Thus, they reveal how the both writers respond to the historical constraints in shaping women identity as well as challenge the patriarchal customs. Therefore, the research bears a great significance in providing a great understanding of feminist narratives.

In this research paper, two novels are taken for analysis from a historical-critical perspective and a feminist perspective. The first novel is *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and the second novel is *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. A brief overview of both novels and their writers is given below.

### **1.1) Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

Kate Chopin was an American author who wrote multiple stories regarding daring and sensitive women. She gave an insight into their inner lives. Moreover, her works were ahead of her time and she was considered a very controversial writer. *The Awakening* was published in the year 1899. The original title of the novel was "A Solitary Soul". The novel is set in Louisiana. The story is about a woman who desires to live her life to the fullest. This desire of hers causes great friction with her family and friends. It also creates a great clash between her values and her happiness. The main protagonist, Edna is a confused woman who is guilty of her desires yet she is attracted to something impossible. Kate Chopin explores the trauma of a woman who is trapped between two opposite ways (Chopin, 1899). This novel is chosen because of its unique storyline and in-depth controversy. This novel will be analyzed as an intersection from the historical-critical and feminist lens.

### **1.2) Charlotte Gilman's *Herland***

Charlotte Perkin Gilman was also an American Lecturer, writer, and novelist. Her novel, *Herland* is a novel with a unique storyline and was published in 1915. Gilman had always focused on the suffering of women (Miquel, 2023). The historical criticism greatly falls in this novel because of the period in which it was written. The story of the novel is focused on the isolated society in which women bear children without the help of men. The novel focuses on how this society is free of domination, conflict, and war focusing on the fact that without men, women are free (Gilman, 1915). *Herland* is unique in terms of its themes and talks about the plight of women in

society. This novel will also be analyzed through the lens of feminism and historical criticism.

## **2) Introduction of the Problem**

Both novels are of significant value as they have a feminist approach. Both novels are written by female writers of the twentieth century. The period in which both novels were written and published has a very strong significance owing to their themes and cultural context. The research will focus on the historical-critical and feminist elements that are present in the novel. Moreover, it will be analyzed what aspects discovered in these elements are different from today's time. There is a great difference between the contemporary time and the time when technology was gaining pace. Since then, the concept of feminism has grown stronger because women have started to defy patriarchy. However, this element will be further explored in this research.

## **3) Understanding of literature through intersectional analysis**

The research is closely aligned to the intersectional research field of Literature. Multiple books have helped the readers in getting an understanding of the society they are living in (Dancer, 2025). Also, both lenses (Historical-critical and feminist) have great significance. The original and primitive meaning of the text is discovered through historical criticism. The recipients and the historical situation of the text are reconstructed when it is visualized through a historical-critical lens. Literature is a very intricate form of art. To understand the ideas and meanings in a literary work, multiple approaches can be used to interpret its meaning. Both historical criticism and Feminist criticism have a very unique approach to understanding literary texts. The opinion and individual preference of the individual matter. Every kind of criticism is presented for creating a unique and rounded understanding of the text (Jauss, 2022). Many works are written in the distant past and the readers are unable to understand the events as they are unaware of the specific culture and period.

Historians aim to find the sources for utilization in their current research. They must also be quite careful about the quality of the source. All sources are not reliable. Usually, when a text is being evaluated from the historical-critical lens, the circumstances in which the author is living. Historians consider the political affiliation of the author and the circumstances/situation in which the author had been living. Bias, on the other hand, is never considered by a historian. The perspectives, and intentions of the author are also analyzed. The events occurring in the text are equally significant. The values and societal norms are also important. Through this lens, scholars can gain insight into the political and cultural context of the text. This will thus contribute to the full understanding of the significance and meaning of the text. The feminist theory helps us understand oppressive and unequal gender relations. Justice and equality are promoted through the analysis of literary texts through this lens. In this way, opportunities for females are provided. Feminism can benefit men. It does not apply to only women so it is beneficial for men as well. The feminist theory recognizes that gender privilege varies in men and women both. So, both of these lenses are relevant to studying the broader meaning of texts.

## **4) Methodology**

The methodology used for the analysis is qualitative. Moreover, textual analysis of both texts is done through the intersections of Historical-critical perspective and Feminist perspective. The examples and instances from both texts are exemplified to find the relevant aspects. Moreover, the instances will be compared to today's time and culture. The literary texts taken for the analysis are Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Gilman's *Herland*. Both novels would be analyzed from the Historical-critical and Feminist lens. Both theories allow for an insight into lived realities of women that were constrained by some calculated historical evidences. These moments provide the literary representation of identity, autonomy and gender. Through the dual lens, *Herland* and *The Awakening* not only tend to critique the patriarchal structures but also revisit the different possibilities of womanhood in the socio-historical contexts.

## 5) Objectives

The objectives of this research are;

- To analyze Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Gilman's *Herland* from a historical-critical perspective
- To analyze Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Gilman's *Herland* from a feminist perspective
- To draw a comparison between the findings and today's culture and feminism

These objectives will be addressed to fulfill the reason for the whole research.

## 6) Analysis and Discussion

The authors of both novels were from the period when the events were changing. The world was transitioning towards industrialization and modernity. The women demanded equal rights as men. They were realizing that they were able to do everything like men. The mainstream concept that women were only born to bear children was considered a very old concept. Women writers elongated and proposed this factor that women were inclined to do something more than that. In the nineteenth century, as the world progressed, everything changed. The thinking of women was changed. Women worked like men to prove their stances. Women started to join different fields that were thought to be only for men. It was obvious that women started to understand the concept of being independent. Many women had been divorced but they continued to work hard for their kids. They never minded doing petty jobs even because they wanted to earn their living. The women writers of this age by their writings ascertained that women were able to do everything without men. For this reason, they introduced several writings like *Herland* and *The Awakening*. Both novels have a traditional feminist approach. Various instances of feminist approaches can be found in these novels.

### 6.1) Intersectionality of Feminism and Historical-Criticism in *The Awakening*

*The Awakening* by Kate Chopin dives into the realistic realms of feminist consciousness and historical realism through the embodiment of underlying tensions between the rising female autonomic discourse and the late nineteenth century American conditions (Aryal, 2024). Through the intersectional approach of Feminist theory and Historical-Criticism, the novel reflects individual rebellion. Furthermore, it sheds light on the existing social constraints in the similar narrative. The novel

reflected the setting in which it was written and also gave a subversive critique to the time period. In *The Awakening*, the reader sees the woman. The novel is historically set in Victorian era in the Creole society of Louisiana (Pradhan, 2025). Edna wants to live her life according to her terms while she is in a marriage and has kids as well. She wants to explore her inner desires to see what things may benefit her heart so that she can be satisfied. Even in a marriage, she is not happy. She falls in love with a man but she is bound by her family norms. So, multiple things are pushing her to stay in her marriage but something is forcing her to look outside of her marriage aura. The novel embodies the imposition of moral expectations from women and rigid gender roles and hierarchies. Through the character of woman, Edna, the writer symbolizes that women were confined to their domestic roles of moral guardianship, motherhood and domesticity.

The Victorian era demanded women to be submissive as it was the most important thing in womanhood. Kate Chopin was aware about the constraints women faced during this period so she represented the struggle between social conformity and personal desire through the character of Edna Pontellier. Edna was excluded of any creative and intellectual autonomy but society expected self-sacrifice and submissiveness from her (Salim, 2022). The Historical-Critical approach in *The Awakening* suggested how Edna starts realizing her worth but the societal conditions didn't allow her to do so, rather she was restricted because of these social conditions. In the late Victorian period, industrial modernization emerged and debates regarding women empowerment grew but still the attainment of equality remained questionable. While fulfilling her responsibilities, Edna wanted to be free and happy but the society considered it as a crime for women to have their own freedom of expression. Edna attempted to reject her marital duties and pursued art that shows rejecting the patriarchal rules. Many critics considered the patriarchal structures of Victorian period as internalized and pervasive.

These patriarchal structures were hence defied by the character Edna through her emotional awakening. Edna's realization is epistemological and psychological at the same time. She transitions into a strong woman through different instances, for example, she was defined by the gazing of men but later she was defined as a strong woman who made her own choices (Zhang, 2025). Her defying acts such as her reluctance to attend any social functions and her pursuance of artistic creations, symbolized her construction of an independent identity. The feminist perspective of *The Awakening* however constructs that in her liberation, there is a tragic paradox. This tragic paradox analyzes that what Edna desired was quite impossible because of the moral boundaries during that era. When she walks into the sea, it depicts transcendence and surrender. The sea is symbolic as it represented the greater space that lied beyond the moral rules of Creole. The sea also symbolizes dissolution of patriarchal rules and female fluidity. Kate Chopin intelligently analyzes the concept of rebellion in Edna's case as fraught with result and necessary. *The Awakening* is coherent and relevant to the social realities of the Victorian era.

The Historical-critical context in the novel reveals that self-annihilation of the main character was not an isolated choice but a part of greater socio-cultural conflict. As the concept of "New Woman" emerged, anxiety began to rise. The reason was that the concept had triggered the already in-built societal patriarchal reforms and now woman wanted sexual, financial and professional independence. Women wanted education to build their own social individuality and identity. This patriarchal anxiety is personified in *The Awakening* through the character of Edna but the emotional cost of subjugation is clearly showcased. The systemic rigidity of the society Edna was part

of reflected the Historical-critical element in the novel. Her death symbolizes her last possible effort to stick to her goal but at the same time, the impossibility of living as a woman with dreams of independence. The literary realism used by Kate Chopin further elaborates the intersectional critique of the novel. This interplay between modernist experimentation and realism mirrors the conflict between freedom and conformity that showcases Edna's journey.

Finally, the intersection of Feminist Theory and Historical-Critical Analysis unveils the novel to be a timeless articulation of struggles of women. Chopin reiterates the cultural imprisonment of females through Edna's character. Edna's character represented transitional movements such as "Silence to voice", "Constraints to freedom" and "Objectivity to subjectivity".

## 6.2) Intersectionality of Feminism and Historical-Criticism in *Herland*

*Herland* lies at the convergence of Feminist and Historical-Critical discourse and embodies the female utopian imagination (Jankovsky, 2021). The novel also reveals the ideological and social conditions that gave way to First wave feminism. Through the Historical-Critical lens, the novel is situated in the era of social reform where there were slight optimistic possibilities of moral and scientific progress for women. The author-centric view of the novel suggests that Gilman herself was very vocal regarding women empowerment. She believed in the intellectual and moral superiority of cooperative social hierarchies. Gilman's thoughts are historically situated in the rationalist and reformist ethos of her period (Li, 2022). The novel, *Herland*, portrays a feminist society. The novel focuses on rather an imaginary and fictional society which is led by women after the disappearance of men.

*Herland* depicts a society where women are independent and living peacefully. The civilization is organized around mutual respect, education and communal motherhood. Gilman successfully transposed the ideals of organized social life and progression into a feminist narrative. This feminist narrative questioned the patriarchal assumptions regarding civilization, power and gender. *Herland* critiques the early decades of the twentieth century American society in which patriarchal imperialism and capitalism were highly justified. The male characters in the novel; Van, Jeff and Terry showcase the ethnocentrism and arrogance of western patriarchal constructs. In the novel, these three explorers come from an advanced civilization but they depict their insecurities, moral immaturity and arrogance when they arrive in a society where everything is going well without men.

In the novel, *Herland*, it is shown that multiple women are bearing kids alone and raising them without the help of a man. The novel indicates a theme that men do take care of women but they spread negativity when they get control of a woman. The novel defies patriarchy but in the end, the benefits of having a caring man as a husband are also shown. The concept that is misunderstood by men and women is rewritten in the novel that a woman requires a caring man but doesn't want him to have full authority over her. Women are raped often which makes other women feel that all men are worst and care is just a word for them. All women want is someone who helps them in taking care of a child and herself as well.

With the passage of time, rape and womanizing have become very common in the world and women are very doubtful about the idea of marriage. They are not satisfied that marriage will bring any change like men. In *Herland*, a society is shown that only comprises women (Gilman, 1915). Women can do everything in their capacity for their children. While reading *Herland* from a feminist perspective, the novel clearly

transforms the genre of Utopia into a structured feminist epistemology. The female characters in *Herland* redefine progress through the elimination of sexual exploitation, greed and war. Thus a social order is constructed through mutual cooperation. The absence of the men didn't define absence of protection but it defined liberation. Moreover, Gilman's portrayal of women in *Herland* demonstrate the notion that women have evolved beyond the realms of power and gender (Özmen, 2021). They are very happy in a society where they have freedom to move and evolve. In Gilman's world of *Herland*, women are free and they don't have any burden or responsibility of bearing children. Here, motherhood is shown to be a collective responsibility.

Women don't mind doing the same jobs as men as shown in the novel. The concept of this novel is that women are independent and there is less chaos in society without men. Moreover, they have every necessity they could think of. However, the writer has also shown that women might not be facing any problems related to men, but there are other problems that they have to think about. These problems may be of different kinds and nature. Women and men both will benefit from themselves. The period in which both authors were living was a progressive time. With the advent of technology, women were needed in offices to perform different kinds of jobs. The period is of major significance as it will tell about the accuracy of the factors mentioned in both novels by these writers. The writers have done their best to inform the readers about the problems encountered by women of that period. Women are meant to be protected from men because men have been violating their rights from the beginning of time.

### **6.3) Comparative analysis of both novels in terms of women's autonomy and historical context**

The comparison of Gilman and Chopin reveals both divergence and convergence in their reaction towards women autonomy in their specific historical period. Chopin's *The Awakening* is set in the society that was highly conservative. The social climate was highly tensed for women and an attempt to leave their households to fulfill their dreams was thought to be a major sin, more like a rebellion from the patriarchal norms of the late nineteenth century. Therefore Chopin attempts to portray women not as weak entities but rather obligated towards prioritizing their marriage and house. If, they wanted to pursue their career along with their marriages, the society didn't allow them to do so. They faced obstacles as the patriarchal society feared that they may outsmart them. During this period, the women who lived alone with their families or who were widows were offered highly petty jobs. Often, in the pursuit of these jobs, they were harassed and silenced by their owners. Chopin's attempt to depict a woman who wants to live her life according to her own choices shows how society was skeptical about women pursuing their own choices. Through the character of Edna, Chopin reflects on demanding women autonomy in that period as a highly personal and tragic pursuit. Thus, Edna's awakening consequently collides with the society's patriarchal and rigid moral codes.

Where *The Awakening*, focuses on women as being obligated and helpless, Gilman's *Herland* gave an insight into how women were living independently and without the control of patriarch system. The historical setting of *Herland* is the early twentieth century underlined progressiveness. *Herland* envisioned autonomy as achievable and collective through education and social construction. Gilman, through *Herland* proposed a society where women had their own choices equated with freedom of expression (Gilman, 1915). The main point in comparing both novels with respect to

writers stance is that both writers acknowledged the sacrifices of women but according to the historical periods they wrote their works in. Chopin placed an emphasis on individual rebellion against the confines of patriarchal norms but Gilman constructed a Utopian world where women were the rulers without any masculine involvement. In the realm of historical settings of both novels, there is a contrast between one society that denies that women should be given the authority to make their own decisions and on the other hand there is a society that is preparing itself to think that women should be given “some” portion of decision-making. This contrast tells about the historical moment of both writers that shaped their vision of independence, liberation and autonomy.

## 7) Conclusion

Both of these novels from the intersectional study talk about the trauma of a normal woman who believes that she is not getting equal rights from society as men are having. With the change of time, women have become thoughtful. They can earn for themselves and their children but, significantly, they are protected. Women are vulnerable but now times have changed. They have become aware of their rights and protocols. They have realized over the time that they are meant to be respected and regarded for their achievements. The historical-critical and the feminist analysis of the both novels showcase that women were only meant to take care of their marriage, house and spouse. As the writings of Chopin and Gilman indicate, women have full right to a beautiful life. Modern times have become immune to the fact that women want to enjoy their freedom and fulfill their responsibilities with their own choices.

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