

Exploration of a Matriarchal Society and its Echoes in Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials'

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Abstract

The visualization of 'matriarchy' in fiction usually takes the form of a simple gender-swapped version of patriarchy itself: the roles presently occupied by males are shifted to females. Unable to imagine a world with women occupying the positions of power while males exist, some hypothesize a world containing only the females. In a society where patriarchy has completely invaded the psyche of human beings, as numerous critics and academicians believe, the creation of an entirely matriarchal society, even hypothetical, becomes virtually impossible. *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), a trilogy of fantasy novels by Philip Pullman, brings to the fore a novel idea into what a matriarchal society might look like. This paper attempts to understand the fundamentals of patriarchy and matriarchy, and to analyse Pullman's depiction, thereby drawing conclusions whether or not such a construct is possible. The methodology used is examination of prior research done on the topic, analysis of the text and conjecture coupled with observation.

Keywords: Patriarchy; Society; Matriarchy; Construct; Literature.

Introduction

In a sufficiently advanced civilization, the society becomes a semi-independent sentient entity. It does not simply remain a construct to move the workings of the civilization forward, but instead begins to dictate the actions and psychology of the units comprising the civilization, i.e. the individuals. The present society, with its foundations laid on a patriarchal setup, has controlled the minds and actions of the average individuals from time immemorial. In sheer scale, patriarchy engulfs virtually the entire world, affecting both males and females. As bell hooks wrote in her essay, "Patriarchy is the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation" (hooks 1).

In his book ‘The Inevitability of Patriarchy’ (1973), Steven Goldberg states that “women follow their own physiological imperatives and [...] they would not choose to compete for the goals that men devote their lives to attaining” (233). He further explains that male dominance is not due to an imbalance in egalitarian power, but because biologically, physiologically and psychologically, males are drawn towards aggressive and domineering tendencies, while females possess gentler and more nurturing traits. “Men are aware of this and that is why in this and every other society they look to women for gentleness, kindness, and love, for refuge from a world of pain and force, for safety from their own excesses” (Goldberg 234). With society consisting of such binaries, the existence of a pure matriarchy is negated.

On the other hand, an egalitarian non-patriarchal system was not considered as matriarchal formerly. However, with new researches arising, undertaken primarily by female researchers, this notion has begun to be refuted; according to them, the term ‘matriarchy’ needs to be more strictly redefined. Considerable work has been done on this perspective by the German scholar Heide Göttner-Abendroth.

This paper aims to observe the existing definitions, and the changes that have arisen in the past from these definitions, and by doing so, conjecture to hypothesize the reconstruction of a social setup that, while seemingly opposite to patriarchy, is actually a separate and different form of structuring civilization – similar to how democracy is different from monarchy, where none can be absolutely called greater than the other, with each having its own merits and demerits.

Defining Matriarchy

Matriarchy is generally considered to be a social system in which females hold the primary power positions in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. Regarding these factors individually in the present context, it is known that women at present do not hold primary power positions, and while there are women in positions of power – politically and proprietarily – these are not ‘primary’. Secondly, observing the moral authority and social privilege, it is seen that the world’s leading philosophies and sciences are based on male dominated views; indeed, as mentioned in his “Politics”, Aristotle claims that “As regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject.” (Smith 467).

The masculine motive is considered to be glory and power, while the feminine motive is beauty and creation. It is this difference in nature that Aristotle mistook for superiority and inferiority,

and it is this difference in nature that is crucial to the construction of a civilization from the gender perspective.

Cynthia Eller, in her book “The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past will not give Women a Future” (2000), defines matriarchy as: “[...] any society in which women’s power is equal or superior to men’s and in which the culture centres around values and life events described as ‘feminine’” (13).

In a civilization where women, or the feminine side, are in power, the cultural context would entirely differ from the present. The civilization itself would be centred on nature, as the feminine side favours creation, protection and adaptation, in contrast to the masculine side, that favours domination, expansion and conquest. Additionally, the architectural and technological aspects of the society would also change, with *ynic* symbolism replacing the current phallic symbolism in the underlying unconscious of the psyche. It must be understood, however, that a matriarchal society cannot be constructed without unlearning the values that are imposed, mostly to one’s oblivion, by the patriarchy, both on males and females.

Matriarchal Prehistory

Matriarchal Prehistory declares that before patriarchal dominance of the world, there existed a matriarchal society that lived in complete harmony with nature and flourished peacefully. Following this, patriarchy took over and led to the state of the world at present with female suppression, oppression and social degradation. According to this hypothesis (with no unambiguous or definitive evidence of its existence), patriarchy is a fairly recent and new development, and that matriarchy is what universally governed the workings of the civilization. While this theory has been used by several fields of feminism, there are numerous scholars who refute its claims, based on archaeological and textual evidences. Cynthia Eller discards this theory in “The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory” (2000), arguing that the existence of such a theory leads to the argument, mainly from the male critics of matriarchal systems, of patriarchy being a more evolved form of civilization as a consequence of its substitution of matriarchy, and to the females it offers a view that patriarchy serves as a recent development that can be, and must be, ended in order for the state of the world to improve. These support the radical feminist views, which Eller aims to dethrone. This myth of matriarchal prehistory ignores the fact that both the masculine and the feminine counterparts need to co-exist in order to achieve a truly harmonious civilization.

Non-Matriarchal Female-Centric Societies

While the existence of an unambiguously matriarchal society is doubtful, there are societies that are female-centric but not matriarchal (based on feminine values), either practicing a gender-inverted version of patriarchy or simply focusing on the female lineage rather than the male. Matrilineality refers to the tracing of ancestry and inheritance through the female line. In this system, every individual is identified through their mother's line, or matriline, contrary to the prevalent system of patriline, where the male's family name and ancestry is given more importance.

The belief that early human familial structure was universally matrilineal was favoured by numerous anthropologists and prehistorians, until the end of the nineteenth century (Murdock 185). After considerable debates and reassessments of this theory throughout the twentieth century, it was concluded that it must be true. This was in part due to the research in ancient childcare practices, which made possible the evolution of the unusually large human brain and characteristic human psychology, as evidenced by the cooperative breeding hypothesis (Burkart 183). Additionally, the 'grandmothering hypothesis' seems to support this view, as it explains the evolutionary development of menopause by way of social support and preservation of genes through care of offspring – "the selective advantage of distinctively human postmenopausal life-spans is that it enabled older women to assist their adult children in caring for and provisioning grandchildren" (Knight 80). Employing the genetic perspective, the certainty of a son bearing an offspring is much lower as compared to a daughter bearing one. "For grandmothers to invest preferentially in their descendants through sons, therefore, would not be an evolutionarily stable strategy. [...] the grand mothering hypothesis tips the scales decisively in favour of matrilineal residence and matrilineal descent" (80). Examples of matrilineal governance include the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, Indonesia, and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia; the Nairs of Kerala and the Billavas and Bunts of Karnataka; the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo of Meghalaya.

The matrilineal system cannot be called matriarchal because only the power rests with the females, with no other differences in functioning of the society; the feminine values are not truly embedded in the functioning and structuring of the social systems.

Masculinity versus Femininity

It is only through the understanding of the essential differences between the duality of human consciousness that one can estimate the creation of a society based on that particular aspect. Masculinity is the fundamental root of the patriarchal society, and conversely, femininity must be kept in view for the construction of a matriarchal structure of civilization.

Masculinity refers to, generally, the attributes associated with boys and men, although these attributes can also be displayed by females. Certain traditionally masculine traits are strength, courage, independence, leadership and assertiveness. Similarly, traits that are generally attributed to females, though can be exhibited by males as well, are gentleness, empathy, humility and sensitivity. Although there is some biological evidence as to the emergence of these traits, masculinity and femininity remain a largely social concept.

Additionally, the terms masculine and feminine do not directly mean male and female. They describe specific attributes, which are dominant in either of the sexes. A female can have masculine traits and vice versa. Moreover, both these facets constitute an individual's consciousness, and the absence of any one would be considered an abnormality or imbalance. Observing the basic essential drives, where masculinity aims to acquire glory, recognition and power, femininity aims to create, give and preserve beauty. This is not to say that a female cannot desire power or glory or a male cannot wish for beauty; on the contrary, as a social construct, both femininity and masculinity are present in an individual, but varyingly; social factors play a great role in the emergence and exhibition of the behaviour influenced by either side of self.

Patriarchy – A Societal View

An individual's purpose in life, socially, is to achieve success in the form of fame, wealth, recognition, and perhaps, at the end, leave behind a legacy that would remember them. From childhood, one is taught to compete and win, in order to achieve one's goals in life, i.e. success and recognition. Courage, independence and assertiveness, traits primarily masculine, are ingrained deeply. From an economical view of the society, the entire concept of capitalism is based on the principle of acquisition and ownership – basically a masculine craftwork. Thus, it becomes evident that the current framework and structure of civilization is based on masculine values and traits.

In order to create a true matriarchal society, these traits and values need to be drastically changed and redefined. If a true matriarchy is to be made possible, then a massive restructuring

of the world would have to be in order, and while such changes aren't possible in a short time-span, gradual and definite alterations, stemming from the psyche of the individuals, would possibly turn the civilization towards matriarchy; but such gradual alterations would take more than a few decades and because the values of patriarchy are so deep-seated in the social consciousness, numerous generations would pass before the rise of a descendance that is not influenced by patriarchal prejudices and thought-patterns.

While the rise of matriarchy (if there is a probability of such a time in the distant future) cannot be witnessed in-person, it is possible to acquire an idea of how that society would appear and how it would work.

Societal Restructuring

In a matriarchal society, the power would rest in the hands of the female; thus, the definitions of governance and administration would also be entirely different from the present. The concept of an egalitarian system becomes obsolete considering the fact that one side of the coin holds more power than the other here – femininity is dominant over masculinity, contrary to the present where the reverse is true.

One can indeed argue that the subjection of women to the extent seen in the present civilization would not equal the subjection of men in a matriarchal society, but some gender-based disparities are to be expected in a matriarchal system. The major inequality can be the male's input in the shifting or handling of power. With males being seen as impulsive and aggressive, and the decision-making power therefore being retracted from them, the society would work on a more tolerant, sensitive and emotion-based power structure.

The shift in the power-roles would have a great effect on the literature and media of the time as well. Additionally, the standards of society would tilt in the favour of women. While patriarchy assigns the role of sex-object to women, it assigns to men the role of violence-object, with male expendability being corollary to the sexual objectification of girls (Milojević 57). It can thus be conjectured that in a matriarchal society, such objectification would be reversed in some form.

From the prehistoric times, the role of male as hunter and the female as gatherer was noted. By natural selection, these roles are supported – natural selection is more likely to favour male reproductive strategies that stress mating effort, and female strategies that emphasize parental

investment (Bird 65-75). The patriarchal society glorifies the role of the hunter, and the matriarchal society would, similarly, emphasize the role of the gatherer. The feminine side is characterized by values such as tenderness and empathy, along with beauty and creation: therefore, a matriarchal society can confidently be thought to be driven by creativity and beauty.

Matriarchy in *His Dark Materials* – The Witches

His Dark Materials, a trilogy of fantasy novels by Philip Pullman, tells of a society where femininity is the centre of power and the masculine side is largely ignored. The witches portrayed in the trilogy are exclusively female and live in the far north, away from the patriarchal society of the rest of the world and much closer to nature. Their culture includes their own Gods and Goddesses, the primary one of which is Yambe-Akka, their goddess of death, who “was merry and light-hearted and her visits were gifts of joy” (Pullman, “The Subtle Knife” 41). This marks a crucial departure from the masculine perception of death as something to be feared and avoided. A feminine society – closer to the cycles of birth and death ubiquitous in nature -- would understandably embrace death as a freeing concept.

One of the interesting facts about the witches in the novels is that their closeness to nature is both in a metaphorical and literal sense. As Pullman describes, “They live in forests and on the tundra, not in a seaport among men and women. Their business is with the wild,” (“Northern Lights” 165). This reiterates the recurring theme in a lot of literature that women are much closer to nature than males – as exemplified by the portrayal of Earth itself as mother. From a societal point of view, the communities of witches have created a separate habitat and way of life for themselves in a world dominated by the patriarchy and ruled by technological progress. Pursuit of progress that brings with itself destruction is a feature of the patriarchal and expansionist ideology; if women were to create a society, as has been stated previously, they would be much closer to nature, with a sustainable and creationist worldview. Additionally, this closeness to nature also gives to the witches an almost supernatural ability to observe and feel: “every strand of moss, every icy puddle, every midge in her homeland thrilled against her nerves and called her back,” (“The Subtle Knife” 49). When seen from a realistic perspective, it can be argued that women are both more empathetic and observant than males; the novels have simply exaggerated this feature.

Furthermore, regarding the nature of economic exchange and gain, the novel describes: “Witches own nothing, so are not interested in preserving value or making profits [...]. [They] have no means of exchange apart from mutual aid. If a witch needs something, another witch will give it to her,” (“Northern Lights” 308-09). This goes directly against the capitalistic notions of the current economic and financial foundations of the society. The society of witches – or a society created exclusively by women – does not rely on any currency or profit-loss exchange, but mutual help and sharing. While this may remind one of socialist ideologies, it must be remembered that the notion of ownership or possession does not exist among the witches. Because they are closer to nature, their understanding is of a shared and mutually beneficial coexistence. Land, assets, goods, individuals do not belong to them; rather these are simply objects that exist and may be shared for the benefit of all in the community. The witches are described as “democratic, up to a point; every witch, even the youngest, had the right to speak, but only their queen had the power to decide” (“The Subtle Knife” 55). This describes a society where the power is decentralized and all have the right to opine freely.

Regarding the role of men in their society, the witches only take them as helpers – for dealing with the so-called civilized societies of the world – or as lovers and husbands. If, from a lover, a female offspring is born, then it is taken by the witches and raised to be a witch; if a male offspring is born, then it is taken by the man and raised on his own (“Northern Lights” 315). The union between a witch and a man does not last for long – the reason for this is fantastical, in that witches are said to live for hundreds of years, but from a societal point of view, it makes more sense: in a strongly patriarchal society, the women are reduced to baby-producing machines that work to comfort the males; in a matriarchal society, formed only of women, males must then be reduced to tools of expanding the witch population. This is also reminiscent of the Amazons of Greek myths, but a crucial difference is that while the Amazons killed the men after getting pregnant (and killed or made servants the male offspring), in Pullman’s world, such brutality does not exist. Keeping in mind the features of femininity, it is more probable that Pullman’s version of society would be closer to reality, in that the creationistic women would not kill.

Another interesting power attributed to witches is that of invisibility: “It was a kind of magic she could work to make herself unseen. [...] this was mental magic, a kind of fiercely-held modesty that could make the spell-worker not invisible but simply unnoticed” (The Subtle Knife” 34). This is another instance of an exaggerated symbolism from something realistic –

in our world, for centuries women were invisible, in that no sense of importance or relevance were attributed and no notice was given to them. If this is converted to a power wielded by the females – as was done by several female spies and informants – from a deconstructionist point of view, it opens up several avenues of possibilities in fiction.

Finally, the medical practices in the witches' society are inextricably linked to nature, so much so that their medicines and treatments are ritualistic and incorporate herbs as well as animals (266-69). This is again indicative of the dependence on nature, and the pagan nature of the practices further acts to distance their society from any influence of the Christian patriarchal civilization present in the rest of the world.

Heide Goettner-Abendroth expounds upon the elements of a matriarchal society. According to her, firstly a matriarchy is economically balanced – where there is “no right of ownership, but only the right of distribution.” Secondly, a matriarchy is “a non-hierarchical society of matrilineal kinship,” and politically, it is a “society of consensus.” Goettner-Abendroth also states that “at the cultural level, [matriarchy] is based on a sacred culture in which there are no aloof male gods, but where the worldview is defined by the feminine divine.” (4). All of these elements are clearly justified in the society portrayed in Pullman's trilogy.

The witches' culture focuses on nature and their magic is majorly influenced by the natural forces. Their science and education are also based on natural phenomena, and meditation is emphasized. This affinity towards nature is attributable to the essentiality of femininity, which values creation. Additionally, the economic structure and democratic social stratum further indicates how such a society – with foundational values of femininity – might function. Hence, the witches' society is effectively matriarchal, and, if examined, can be an informative instance of a successful civilization governed by females.

Conclusion

A matriarchal society remains largely a hypothetical possibility. This is aided by ideas from generations of literature, which not only provide varying and wider perspectives, but also give new outlooks both psychologically and socially. That *His Dark Materials* provides valuable insights into the creation of a true matriarchy has been evidenced by analysing the fundamentals of a matriarchy and then comparing those with the portrayals in the trilogy by Philip Pullman.

As has been stated earlier, the ideal civilization would be one in which the values of both masculinity and femininity are incorporated in a positive manner, and in order to achieve that, the patriarchy prevalent now needs to be broken and matriarchal essential values need to be introduced. Although it would take a significant amount of time to get established and function, yet awareness and knowledge coupled with acceptance and mindfulness, would lead to the development of a society more empathetic, harmonious and inclusive – something that is increasingly needed in this patriarchal society: emergence of matriarchy.

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