

Escaping the Gender Roles- A Feministic Study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Abstract

Since time immemorial, the place of women, in both history and literature, has been on the verge or the margin. Across nations and cultures, women were confined within the four walls. They did not have autonomy over their body and over their life. This sometimes led them to a state of depression. Moreover, the traditional gender roles that attributed certain qualities to both genders expected women to be happy with their housewife status which indirectly connoted that their denial in public arena. The present paper tries to make an attempt of how gender ideologies have prevented women from taking up writing and the suffering of women due to this lack of autonomy, and the desire to escape from the madness with a special study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Keywords: gender roles, binary opposition, mental breakdown & the problem that had no name

The problem lay buried. For over fifteen years there was no more of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books, and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers. Over and over women heard in voices of

tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. (Friedan 44)

The place of women has been poignant across the globe since long ago. They were always considered inferior and secondary to men. Many gender roles had been created to control women in a confined space. As the above quote of Betty Friedan indicated, the middle class housewife status was then glorified and women were expected to be happy within the household, taking care of her husband and children. It was a common notion that women were happy and contented with her husband, children and her family. This paper deals with how the traditional gender roles, constructed by society, drive women to a state of madness. For this, the paper analyses Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the protagonist is in the state of maniac and frees herself.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an important literary feminist who is mainly noted for her seminal short story "The Yellow Wallpaper". She was born in the year 1860. She advocated for women's issues, criticizing the traditional gender roles which kept women in a limited, confined space. "The Yellow Wallpaper" was a series of diary entries that were collectively published in the year 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. The immediate publication of a woman's work was also not possible during that time due to the social conditions that prevailed during the 18th and 19th century. As stated by Betty Friedan, women were not expected to think beyond her family. Women were not allowed to take up writing as writing was considered a public medium which clearly reiterates that women were expected to be inside the wall in a confined state. Those who want to break this traditional gender role are again stereotyped by the society as bad woman and seclude them in one or another way. This isolation following humiliation made the women to act as if they were happy with the household chores.

One can see a lot of autobiographical elements in the short story, because like the narrator, the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself had been seriously affected by postpartum depression after the birth of her child in 1885. When she consulted a doctor named Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell for her problem, the doctor advised her to take complete rest as there was no problem for her. This again indicates that women's problems with their minds

are considered insignificant as women themselves were considered neurotic beings sometimes by the andocentric society.

Similarly, the narrator in this short story was advised to take complete rest by her husband John who himself was a physician. For him, there was nothing wrong with her but, in the words of the narrator, “temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency.” For her cure, John, her husband rents an ancestral mansion located in the countryside which he thought would help her wife to recover from her nervous breakdown. According to her husband, and of her brother who was also a doctor, there was no problem with her health, and she was prescribed medicines like phosphate, fresh air and exercises. Most importantly, she was forbidden to “work” until she becomes well. The word “work” here denotes to the act of writing both the narrator as well as Gilman was involved with. This denial of writing or the lack of freedom of expression was the main reason for her mental breakdown. The narrator feels that at least if she writes something, she will be relieved from her hysterical feelings.

On the other hand, she feels that the house is haunted though it looks beautiful, and she does not wish to stay there. The yellow wallpaper in the top room was horrendous but she was confined within that room. When she wanted a room in the downstairs, she was not allowed. According to her husband, that room with the yellow wallpaper was good as she could get plenty of air from there. Whatever she told was sniffed at by her husband who advised her to have self-control and not allow her fancies rule over her.

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened onto the piazza and hard roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! But John would not hear of it.

He said there were only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another. (Gilman 3)

He advises her not to let her fancies control her. “Then he took me in her arms and called me a blessed little goose.” (6) Though in a general sense, it seems that he cares for his wife, there is an underlying thing that should be noted from a feministic perspective. It connotes the lack of autonomy to women even in the choice of her room.

This was the main focus of second wave feminist criticism later from 1960s 1980s which mainly addressed the issues of women, especially their social and economic

dependence of their men. They underwent severe problems, for which, as Betty Friedan stated, there was no name nor do the women could express it clearly which she calls “the problem that has no name.” (Friedan) But they felt a kind of nothingness inside their mind and heart. They were also worried about the stigma that was attached to it, if they would be branded as bad women for not “seeking fulfilment as wives and mothers.” (Friedan) This is again connected with the Victorian concept of womanhood where women were either considered as angels or demons.

The traditional gender roles expected women “to devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children.” Moreover it was a time when women were considered “hysterical” beings by their very nature, their health problems were often dismissed as mere nerves or overreaction. This is what exactly happened to the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper” where her thoughts about the house were dismissed by her husband as mere fancies.

In another sense, this lack of autonomy over her life sometimes drove her to a state of mental breakdown. This is clearly explained by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the following words:

For many years, I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia and beyond. ... I went to ... a noted specialist ... This wise men put me to bed, and applied the rest cure... and sent me home with my solemn advice to “live as domestic a life as far as possible,” to “have but two hours” intellectual life a day,” and “never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again as long as I lived.” This was in 1887.

I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near to the border line of utter mental ruin that I could see over.

The narrator realized that she was trapped inside the room after her husband refused to change neither her room nor the wallpaper. She neither liked the room nor was allowed to ‘work’-write. Her husband John, a doctor, went out to attend his cases. This half- stripped wallpaper drove her to a state of madness because she was all alone in her room. She, then, started to perceive things and secretly wrote in her diary.

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first, and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge, for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

The paint and the paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off-the paper-... I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. ...

The color is repellent, almost revolting: a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

She started to study the patterns in the wallpaper which looked like prison bars, and an image that behind the bars. "I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seem to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design." (9) Soon she realized that the image behind the bars was a woman and she tried to shake the bars during night time to escape. She was terrified and informed her husband again to take her away from the place. But he replied "My darling," said he, "I beg of you, ... that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! ... It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?" (15) This highlights the prejudice of dominant patriarchal society in hearing and trusting the words of the marginalized group-women. This was theorized by Miranda Fricker in her "Epistemic Injustice: The Power and Ethics of Knowing" as testimonial injustice which refers to the prejudice of the dominant group as hearer regarding the credibility of the words of marginalized ones. Though here John is a physician, he fails to understand the position and the words of his wife. The failure to have a double vision of the dominant and marginalized perspective made them to arrive at wrong conclusions which were serious hindrances to get objective results too.

The narrator soon became interested in the wallpaper because of the image behind. It seemed that it tried to shake the patterns as if wished to escape from the prison. For this the narrator adjusted her sleep to the day time and she wakes up all night to watch the developments and movements of the image. "I don't sleep much at night, or it is interesting to watch developments;" (19). This is actually because of her depression and mental breakdown.

In another sense, the readers can understand that the figure behind the bars is none other than the narrator's representation herself. "By the daylight she is subdued," (17) connotes the narrator's situation when she is with her husband, who does not give any autonomy to his wife. The narrator thought that the woman was trapped inside the patterns like herself, and so the narrator desperately tried to release the woman behind the patterns. She frequently tries to strip off the wallpaper and on the last day of leaving the house, she almost stripped off all the wallpaper she could. The narrator, like the woman inside the pattern, started to creep inside her room as she believes completely that it is she who is trapped inside the pattern which is denoted by "I've got out at last, said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"(26)The author here connotes the different patterns on the wallpaper to the economic and social conditions which trapped women in a confined place. Thus she becomes completely paranoid because of her loneliness, because of the lack of creative expression. The narrator crept over him who signifies her transgression of traditional gender roles and become independent and attains the autonomy she needed.

This short story also underlines the fact that women's health does not only consist of her physical well-being but also mental well-being. As a doctor, and as a man, John could not understand the feelings of his wife. Had she been provided the freedom and autonomy to express herself freely, she would be a normal woman, recuperated herself from her post-partum depression. When everyone commented on the book that would drive people crazy, Gilman sharply replied "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked."(Gilman, Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper)The doctor, who prescribed Charlotte Perkins Gilman the medicines, was sent a copy of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and though he initially did not accept it, later the doctor admitted to his friends that he had changed his treatment for mental breakdown.

In another sense, the short story effectively challenges the traditional practice of confining a woman for about 40 days which will vary from one culture to another after delivery. She is considered polluted during the period. Though in one sense, it provides complete rest for the new mother and to create and develop a bonding towards her baby, the isolation sometimes along with the hormonal imbalance create a sort of mental depression to the mother.

Thus the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” in multiple ways challenges the traditional patriarchal society, where women are considered inferior and secondary to men. It is considered a landmark in the feminist literary criticism. “The Yellow Wallpaper”, as its author had stated was written to change the perception and position of women in the society and clearly portrayed how the autonomy helps her to be in a good condition both physically and mentally.

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