

CHARLOTTE PERKIN'S GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER": A PARABLE OF THE FEMALE GOTHIC

Stuti Sharma
Research Scholar
Department of English
Panjab University
Chandigarh

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an American writer first published in January "The Yellow Wallpaper," a six thousand word short story in the year 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. To register her protest against the institutions that stifled a woman's existence she chose writing as her medium and spoke against the Cult of True Womanhood, the ideology that legitimized the victimization of women. Under this seemingly benevolent Cult of Domesticity, women were imprisoned in the home/private sphere, were treated like servants tending to the needs of the family. Furthermore, the Cult of Purity obliged women to remain virtuous and pure even in marriage with their manner continuing to be one of modesty. Religious piety and submission were beliefs that were more peripheral components of the ideology, yet both were borne of and a part of the ideology of True Womanhood. These were the means that men used to insure the passivity and docility of women. Religion would pacify any desire that could cause a deviation from these set standards while submission implied vulnerability and dependence on the patriarchal head. It is against this backdrop that Gilman gave vent to her anger against the stereotypes that confined and suppressed a woman's existence in late nineteenth century.

A parable about a nameless narrator the story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is replete with Gothic elements of confinement, rebellion, prohibited desire and unspeakable fear. The story offers a traditional Gothic recipe of a distressed heroine, a spooky mansion, and an authoritarian male hero. Working from this premise Gilman's tale "adroitly and at times parodically employs Gothic conventions to present an allegory of literary imagination unbinding the social, domestic and psychological confinements of a nineteenth century woman writer," says Greg Johnson who claims "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a Gothic allegory (522).

An offshoot of the parent genre, the female Gothic was a term first used by Ellen Moers in her seminal work *Literary Women* (1976). She defined it as 'the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century,' we have called "the Gothic." A definition of 'the Gothic' was, she admitted, less easily stated, "except that it has to do with fear" (90). Moers' analysis of Female Gothic texts as a coded expression of women's fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth was extremely influential. It not only engendered a body of critical work which focused on the ways in which the Female Gothic articulated women's dissatisfactions within the patriarchal society, it also addressed the problematic position of the maternal within that society, and placed Gothic at the centre of the female literary tradition. Using Eugenia C. DeLamotte's words: "the 'fear of power' embodied in Gothic romance is a fear not only of supernatural powers but also of social forces so vast and impersonal that they seem to have supernatural strength" (17). Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short-story is a perfect example of a female Gothic narrative

that portrays a woman's journey; a femme coquette, who has no control over herself or her circumstances, situation akin to her other sisters at the time when the story was published.

A first person narrative the story is a collection of journal entries written by a woman whose physician husband has confined her to the upstairs bedroom of a house he rented for the summer. The windows of the room are barred, and there is a gate across the top of the stairs, allowing her husband to control her access to the rest of the house. She is forbidden from working, and has to hide her journal from him, so she can recuperate from what he calls a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency," a diagnosis common to women in that period. The claustrophobic setting of the dull summer mansion in the story depicts the effect of confinement on the narrator's mental health, and her descent into psychosis. With nothing to stimulate her, she becomes obsessed by the pattern and colour of the yellow wallpaper. She confesses:

It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things. But there is something else about that paper – the smell! ... The only thing I can think of that it is like is the colour of the paper! A yellow smell.

This physical and mental confinement force her into insanity, where the boundaries between herself and her delusion blur and they fuse to an extent that she ultimately reaches to frightening state of indistinction.

According to Sybill Korff Vincent, the genre Female Gothic “expresses conflicts within female regarding her own sexuality and identity, and uses a highly stylized form and elaborate detail to effect psychic catharsis” (157). The most important part of this cathartic process occurs in a stylized space, that is, in the domestic space—an otherwise safe refuge in which majority of Charlottes’ spend their maximum life especially in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This home space, in Female Gothic is that unfamiliar/unhomely space which questions and criticizes the predestined and predetermined roles designed especially for women.

In general, the Gothic genre includes everything that is dark, macabre and sinister and the Female Gothic in particular focuses on the lived reality pertaining to the ideology of domestic bliss and separate spheres that later acquire a monstrous form of a haunted house inhabiting a haunted heroine. Perhaps the narrative speaks for all women, who cannot move beyond the safe precincts of home. It can be said then, the house being a central image takes on a new meaning in Gothic fiction, Eva Figes says:

The house of the bridegroom, into which the heroine will move after marriage, is always of prime importance. But in the Gothic novel the house changes from being a symbol of male privilege and protection conferred on the fortunate female of his choice, to an image of male power in its sinister aspect, threatening and oppressive. (74)

Appropriating this idea, Kate Ferguson Ellis adds: “it is the failed home that appears on the pages, the place from which some (bad men) are locked out and others (usually women) are locked in” (*Contested ix*).

The Yellow Wallpaper of Perkins’ is a narrative with a difference as it differs from the narrative of Mother Radcliffe’s traditional Gothic in the sense that it offers a post-marital scenario where the sins of the husband (not the father) may be said to be visited upon the wives (not the daughters). In other words, the tale is that modern Female Gothic narrative wherein the heroine is not an angel in the house,

and the story however foregrounds the fear of entrapment that women experience in their everyday lives. In the story, the heroine maps out her growth in an otherwise faded but an isolated castle wherein she lives a confined life under the tutelage of her physician husband and her sister-in-law. The fear of losing her independence and her identity is represented as denial over self. Reading, writing and using her voice are all denied to her by her over authoritative husband and his agents. Whatever specimens she narrates from her life she does so by being defiant and in hiding; she even acknowledges her vulnerable position, “he hates to have me write a word”.

The creative narrator, who often sails into her lands of fancy and imagination and is diagnosed to be suffering from “temporary nervous depression” is portrayed in sharp contrast to her rational, wise and practical husband who has “no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures”. His simple denial to acknowledge his wife’s suffering portrays his own mental block rooted in the so called moral codes of the society. In this context the narrator divulges: “John does not really know how much I really suffer. He [presumes] there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him” (emphasis mine). In the name of sense and sensibility, he forces his wife to give up her art of storytelling and further advises her to exercise restraint on her imagination. His agents further add fuel to the fire—the narrator’s brother and host of other medical practitioners also support the cruel man’s hypocrisy. Though she follows their counsel and “take phosphates and phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics and journeys and air, and exercise, and absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until well again” yet she personally is against their theories and knows that her work, along with freedom to exercise her choice to live life would make her better. Since, she is a woman; her personal opinion is brushed under the carpet and is dismissed as unwanted and insufficient.

The rented summer castle also plays a vital role in the story. In context of the castle’s character, DeLamotte explains its key function in the Female Gothic space as “ ‘an objective correlative for the terrors of ‘the spirit engaged with the forces of violence’ ”. In other words, in the castle’s symbolic space a conflict of the soul of the protagonist takes place. Like in the story the heroine superficially adheres to the rest-cure that invites her attention to the house yet the atmosphere of the house absorbs her mentally and emotionally. Through the character of the heroine Delamotte observes that the dangers of a Female Gothic heroine are thus portrayed: “At the threshold she does not speculate on the intentions of the person who brought her there; rather she responds to the atmosphere of his house”. John is not the owner of this faded old Gothic castle yet it is his decision to bring the heroine in this isolated site for recuperation. Her language, her concern, her need to be able to express her feelings on paper and the fear of being discovered in the act of writing weigh heavily on protagonist’s consciousness.

The room that John chooses to isolate her for the rest, in view of suggested cure is also of disturbing nature. She charts out the history of this “yellow” room and discovers that “it was nursery first, and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge for the windows are barred for the little children and there are rings and things in the walls”. She feels like a bird caged in, a bird who is forced into confinement despite her protests. This portrays the imbalance and sense of supremacy in their marriage as does the habit of addressing her with such tiny little adjectives like “blessed little goose” and “little girl”. Gilman further adds weight to heroine’s argument:

The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach,

and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long.

There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word.

According to feminist Elaine Showalter, the room in which the narrator is confined looks like an asylum, with barred windows to forbid the locomotion of inmates. The room that has yellow wallpaper thus becomes a prison to curb female protagonist's freedom, a space to imprison and thereby suppress her creative, mental and emotional abilities. A perfect traditional female Gothic setting is narrator's yellow nursery where her heavy immovable bed nailed to the floor represents that ambiguous space that arrests her further development let alone the rehabilitation and so called recovery prescribed by the prison master—the John—the Gothic villain in view of the self-declared *misdiagnosis* of post-partum nervous depression (emphasis mine). Like the mad scientist, Dr. Victor Frankenstein, who conducts physical experiments, the narrators physician husband conducts psychological experiments and chooses his own wife to be the subject, that is, controlled in the study. In the process he isolates her from the public sphere. His wife's constant pleas for social contact as she yearns to communicate with society, her desire of companionship and re-unification go in vain. Her husband's disregard to cater to his wife's whims and desires, his denial of her autonomy altogether contribute in suppression of her voice and punctures her make-believe of being looked after by both John and Jane. All this makes obvious the fact that she is a harmless and helpless victim of a well planned out conspiracy involving those who she trusts blindly.

The external action and internal action and relationship between physical and mental space also play a significant role in the entire narrative of the story. The Yellow Wallpaper in the nursery chamber of the narrator also acquires a character of its own. Her conversations with the paper, with fictitious characters moving inside especially the image of a woman who communicates to and with the heroine, her declaration that "there are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will", are various agents of Gilman to reveal the dark truths about the status of women in America (1892). The heroine's attempt to write on a "dead paper" are narrators own attempt to reveal all that is unsaid to her living readership. Unlike Bertha Rochester, who took revenge from her patriarch who had imprisoned her in the Victorian classic *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte chooses to write lived experience(s) to fight the patriarch. By means of this act she chooses to write her-story, the heroine thus chooses history as a medium to register her protest and in this manner she also becomes a psychoanalyst of patriarchy.

The pattern of the wallpaper too also has dual character. During different stages of a day's progression it also looks different and metaphorically depicts and also accounts for different mood-swings of the narrator. The narrator also realizes that the pattern possesses two aspects: externals pattern

of grills and internal pattern of a hurdle in escape. The image of the narrator caught in a net trap also seems to suggest the struggle of a femme fatale that forms the core of the traditional female Gothic narrative. Though the story is about a married woman, imprisoned in the patriarchal walls in a claustrophobic environment, it is a perfect Gothic script in which marriage and the child birth together become a prison. The Yellow Wallpaper functions as mirror that reflects the constraining nature of the socio-cultural codes that empower patriarchy and weigh heavily on a woman's consciousness. In a way the narrative of Yellow Wallpaper is a Gothic text that mirrors the oppression, suppression and subsequent exploitation of women via the plight of a narrator, who continuously sees her mirrored by the image of the imprisoned woman in the wallpaper. Unlike the traditional Female Gothic, Gilman's Yellow Wallpaper is an iconic text as it acknowledges the fact that women's own creative critical acumen, is a unique way to destabilize the traditional set standard so called logical role of rational patriarchy.

The female lead's complex vision of the Gothic horror's of patriarchy in the story is magically crafted in the form of horrific vision of senseless crawling, infantile narrator in a posture that symbolizes position of women in America of late nineteenth century. Towards the close of the narrative the narrator emerges victorious in an undeclared battle over her (mis)diagnosis. She takes charge of her life in her own hands, and ironically, John faints:

"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing! "

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!

Thus, the otherwise sane John suffers an unexpected fall and crashes, while the so called insane narrator seems to enjoy her strange but new found freedom. In this scene she even transforms a dim lit yellow nursery into a place of refuge replete with "beautiful door" she feels should not be demolished. In the process she also frees the woman in the wallpaper—the other—whom she then recognizes as an extension of herself and thus reclaims her freedom and gets empowered.

In contemporary scenario, Gilman's imaginative story echoes the idea that until men accept women as vocal subjects; the real world will continue to remain a Gothic threat for women. Thus, the Female Gothic is an extremely powerful and important genre of twentieth century through which the Gothic reality of everyday life especially the issues of gender ideology may be challengingly addressed.

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