

Rhizomatous Identity in “The Yellow Wallpaper”: A Deleuzo-Guattarian Perspective

Preeti Puri¹ & Shefali²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Management, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar National Institute of Technology Jalandhar. Orcid id: 0000-0002-6822-5420

Email: purip@nitj.ac.in

²Assistant Professor, DAV University. Email: shefalibassi1997@gmail.com

Abstract

This article is an attempt to move beyond the conventional binary heuristic of identity to its progressive representation based on multiplicity, difference, and dispersion popularized by the ‘rhizomatic’ theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story, “The Yellow Wall Paper”. It is a cliché belief that multiplicity comprises of numerous units, and these units can be eventually united under one category such as the ages of population. Deleuze and Guattari interrogated such logocentric assumptions, and ‘arborescent root- tree’ model of objectified structures, language, identity and self. This article seeks to trace the voyage of Jane’s identity whose dairy constitutes the story “The Yellow Wall Paper”. Her identity has evoked ramified and conflicting networks of references. Feminists broach that she is caged to be a conventional caring mother; for a Freudian she is a ‘hysteric’ struggling with temporary nervous depression, Lacanian posit that she is a ‘psychotic’ who persistently tries to satisfy the ‘gaze’ of her physician husband John, and for a Deleuzian the moment she fails to bear the burden of capitalism driven ‘bio-power’ and ‘nuclear family’ she becomes a ‘schizo’. The object of study of this article is not Jane’s mind which romanticizes asylums rather the interrelation between ‘bio-power’ and her ‘desire’. The article will portray that Jane’s ‘self’ is evacuated from its fixed position to cherish free form of human interaction, and her identity is not handcuffed by any law, rather it is in a state of constant ‘flux’, in a ceaseless motion of ‘becoming’, it is a ‘rhizome’, facilitating a non- hierarchical network.

Keywords: Body Without Organs, Assemblage, Desiring- Machine, Rhizome

1. Introduction

Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, is an account of a woman who is “diagnosed by her husband, a physician, as suffering from nervous depression following the birth of her first child” (Oakley, 1997, p. 31). The narrator’s husband, John takes her to an ancestral place, and isolated in the “colonial mansion” she undergoes physical, mental and emotional breakdown. John prescribes the narrator, Jane “rest cure”, and forbids her “to touch pen to paper until she is well again” (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p.89), however Jane on the contrary believes that “congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good” (Gilman, 1892, p. 648). Jane feels caged in the “nursery room” and the colour of the wallpaper appears to her “repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight” (Gilman, 1892, p. 649). She engrosses herself completely in analyzing the yellow wallpaper, its “anthropomorphic

patterns” and “smell” (Quawas, 2013, p. 43). She spots some “dim shapes” on the outer pattern of the wallpaper, and a figure of a “woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (Quawas, 2013, p. 652). Jane keeps on writing in her diary secretly, “the early entries” of her diary are “long and contemplative”, and then “decrease in length as they become consumed with the woman’s discoveries about the wallpaper” (Quawas, 2013, p. 43). The figure of the woman which creeps behind the pattern of the wallpaper: “is both the narrator and the narrator's double” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1892, p. 91). Jane tries to free “this double to escape from her textual/architectural confinement” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1892, p. 91). Eventually, the narrator identifies herself with the woman in the wallpaper and posits that “it is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!” (Gilman, 1892, p. 656). John faints when he sees his wife creeping in the room. The achievement of the narrator in the end according to Treichler (1984) is “both triumphant and horrifying” (p. 67), because by refusing to believe in the treatment of John she frees herself from the neurotic identity imposed upon her, and when she finally steps out of the paper, “she leaves the authoritative voice of diagnosis in shambles at her feet.” (p. 67)

2. Literature Review

Jane’s identity has evoked conflicting networks of references. Discussing her identity from a patriarchal standpoint, Elizabeth Boa (1990) posits that, “the prison/nursery conveys the imprisonment of women in the social roles of wife and mother” (p. 20). In the same vein, Karen Ford (1985) broaches that John is “the epitome of male discourse” (p. 310); whereas Paula A. Treichler” (1984) differs in her opinion and states that the wallpaper is a “metaphor for women's discourse” (p. 62), wherein the wallpaper “stands for a new vision of women one which is constructed differently from the representation of women in patriarchal language” (p. 64). Similarly, RulaQawas posits that through her writing the narrator challenges the autonomy of her husband and shows a defiance by “exchanging domestic for artistic concerns.” (50).

Psychotic discourse of Jane’s identity is advocated by Barbara A. Sues (2003) when she posits that Jane’s relationship with the woman in the yellow wallpaper “reflects Lacan’s mirror stage, albeit in an unusual, psychotic way” (92), because narrator’s awareness becomes consumed with this ‘other’ or the “mirror/specular image”. Further, when Jane pens down her thoughts in a diary then it is “a matter of moving from the realm of Imagination to that of the Symbolic Order” (82), because it is only through language one constructs an identity wherein the self and other are different. The big ‘Other’ is Jane’s husband whose gaze she tries to satisfy, but the moment she refuses to succumb before the patriarchal language she is hailed as a schizophrenic and a mad woman.

J. Samaine Lockwood (2012) opines that the colonial mansion where the narrator is staying is “a space that compulsively re-enacts the tyrannies of the colonial condition” (p. 103). He asserts that the story “depicts late-nineteenth-century women . . . being trapped in the same colonial condition as their early-American foremothers” (p. 91). Discussing the issue of women’s health, Ann Oakley (1997) states that Gilman portrays “the issue of the medical labelling of women’s distress as mental illness” (p. 35). Similarly, Christopher Roethle (2020) views that narrator’s “investigations of the wallpaper may still be considered instances of healthy neural work or exercise” (p. 155), through which she gets to know about her situation mirrored in the figure of the creeping woman.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari oppugned such logocentric models of patriarchy, mental health, and binary oppositions which arrest the flux of identity in a fixed framework. They refuted hierarchical frameworks as these move from transcendental to particular resulting in homogeneous connections and fixed identity. They put forth “schizoanalysis” in their thought

provoking work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* which advocates rhizomatous model of identity based on flux and multiple heterogeneous connections between partial organ machines.

3. Deleuze and Guattari’s Rhizomatous Model of Identity

Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizoanalysis” advocates that identity is a moving matrix, an open system of thought, devoid of an entry and exit point, and has the potential to take on new dimensions. “Schizoanalysis” questions self-contained closed systems like the “arborescent root-tree model”, because these frameworks are “a visible emblem of linear, progressive and ordered systems” (Linstead and Pullen 2006, p. 1290). Further, it promotes that identity is always in a state of flux, and any pre-given model only arrests the flow; whether it is “the flows of words that are bound up in a language, the flows of genetic code between generation of plants, and even the flow of matter itself (the movement of the ocean, electrons moving in metals, and so forth)” (Parr 2005, p.35). Deleuze and Guattari broached that identity is not “defined by either simple materiality, by its occupying space (‘extension’), or by organic structure. It is defined by the relations of its parts . . . where these parts stand in some relation to one another. . . (relations of relative motion and rest, speed and slowness) . . . and has a capacity for being affected by other bodies . . . and by its actions and reactions with respect both to its environment or milieu (Parr, 2005, p. 30-31). “Schizoanalysis” proliferates that identity is a meshwork, a rhizomatic plateau: “an underground- but perfectly manifest – network of multiple branching roots and shoots, with no central axis, no unified point of origin, and no given direction of growth- a proliferating, somewhat chaotic, and diversified system of growths” (Grosz, 1994, p. 199). The following illustration depicts the rhizomatic network of identity which will be followed by an in-depth discourse about the construction and functioning of Jane’s “becoming” through three syntheses proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) “production of productions, of actions and of passions; production of recording processes, of distributions and co-ordinates that serve as points of reference; productions of consumptions, of sensual pleasures, of anxieties, and of pain” (p. 4).

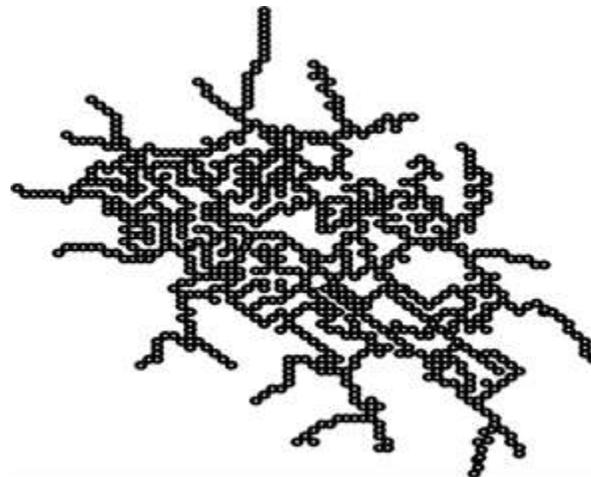


Figure 1: Rhizomatous Model of Identity

3.1 Jane’s Identity in the “Connective Synthesis”

Rhizomatic identity in the “connective synthesis” operates on the concept that an individual’s body is “filled with encounters and relations where anything can meet anything else” (Goodchild, 1996, p. 82); and not a mechanism of a “self-enclosed movement that merely ticks over, never transforming or producing itself” (Colebrook, 2002, p. 57) which means that the human body is analogous to a machine comprising of multiple partial organ machines. A partial organ machine produces a flow, and when it connects with another partial organ machine, the flow gets interrupted, and through this break-flow of connections a ceaseless flow of identity/desire is produced. Deleuze and Guattari term this as “connective synthesis of production”(Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 4). For instance, the breast of the mother is one partial organ machine which produces flow in the form of milk, and the mouth of the child is another partial organ machine which interrupts the flow. Through this break and flow connection the flux of identity/desire is produced. Similarly, smile and hair of the mother is another flow producing partial organ machine which can get connected with the eye of the child. Hence, “every machine functions as a break in relation to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time it is a flow, or the production of flow, in relation to the machine connected to it” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 36). During the “connective synthesis” when the flux of desire is interrupted in order to make new connections then the quality of elements drawn from the flow are completely different from the elements contracted. Thus, the identity derived from this break-flow connection is “a production of difference for the quality produced in contraction does not resemble the elements that are contracted” (Carrier, 1998, p. 191).

In the case of Jane, “connective synthesis of production” takes place when she connects with multiple partial objects like the diary in which she articulates herself, her oneness with nature, and her identification with the woman in the wall paper. The connections which she makes with these partial objects are not marred by socio-psycho repression. They are continual, heterogeneous and polymorphous in nature. Jane tries to breakaway the patriarchal control on language and “becomes a creative and involved language user, producing sentences which break established rules” (Treichler, 1984, p. 74). However, these rhizomatic connections based on difference are enchained when she faces opposition from her physician husband who represses her wish to write. She tries to resist “rest-cure” by articulating “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus” (Gilman, 1892, p. 648). Because of her husband’s interference the narrator’s “desiring-machines” are obstructed to produce a ceaseless flow of identity/desire, and she is excluded from her position from where she can act and express her identity. When her mobility is confined to “the nursery at the top of the house”(Gilman, 1892, p. 648), she ceases to exist as “*homo natura*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 3), because her fertile connection with nature is abruptly put to halt due to which her perception gets clogged. This metaphorical imprisonment of the narrator in the “nursery room” is also a reflection of the denial of representation given to her writing.

3.2 Jane’s Disjunctive Recording of Identity

“Disjunctive synthesis” of identity deals with the recording of signs, and network of relations formed between partial organ machines. Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizoanalysis” proposes its own recording model in the form of “Body Without Organs” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 9) to record rhizomatic identity produced through the break-flow connection between partial organ machines. “Body Without Organs” takes birth when the connection between two partial organ machines is neutralized and put to halt through a counter force “anti-production” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 8). “Anti-production” executes this task by “dis-organ-ising” a body i.e. all organs are set free from their sexual and sensory duties and eventually the body gets

transmuted into a recording surface. “Body Without Organs” does not mean a body without teeth, tongue, hair and so on, rather it opposes the “organizing principles that structure, define and speak on the behalf of the collective assemblage of organs, experiences or state of being” (Parr, 2005, p. 33) and becomes “capable of extraordinary things- that is, not things that lie outside this world, but things that are unusual and out of the ordinary” (Thanem 2007, p. 215). Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizoanalysis” further advocates that “the energy that sweeps through it is divine, when it attract to itself the entire process of production and serves as its miraculate, enchanted surface, inscribing it in each and every one of its disjunctions” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.13).

In the case of Jane, disjunctive recording of identity takes place when her “body without organs” record diverse connections with the diary, nature, and the wallpaper. She feels excited whenever her “desiring-machines” plug an organ machine to another organ machine. However, both capitalist and libidinal economy try to repress Jane’s rhizomatous identity produced through heterogeneous connections and diverse recordings; because rhizomatous identity “no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society . . . it is explosive; there is no desiring machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 116). Hence, whenever she tries to connect with the wallpaper the societal machinery questions her mental health. She is enforced to do a mechanical recording of her cultural identity; her identity as a woman, as a wife and as a mother. When the materialistic recording of her identity is censured by the capitalist and libidinal economy she becomes skeptic about her identity.

3.3 Jane’s “Becoming”

When an individual fails to cope up with the fixed hierarchical structures set up by the capitalist and libidinal economy, one loses his/her predefined global identity which for the libidinal economy is a state of hallucination and delirium; however for Deleuze and Guattari(1983) it is “an experience of intensive quantities” which is almost unbearable and is equivalent to “a cry suspended between life and death” (p. 18). At this juncture “becoming” or rhizomatous identity takes birth which according to “schizoanalysis” is “a voyage of initiation, a transcendental experience of the loss of the Ego, . . . and everything commingles in these intense becomings, passages, and migrations- all this drift that ascends and descends the flow of time: countries, races, families, parental appellations, divine appellations, geographical and historical designations, and even miscellaneous new items. (I feel that) I am becoming God, I am becoming woman, I was Jon of Arc and I am Heliogabalus and the Great Mongol. I am a Chinaman, a redskin, a Templar, I was my father and I was my son” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.84-85). Thus, Jane’s act of tearing down the wallpaper and creeping is “not a sign of deepening madness” (Roethle, 2020, p. 152), rather a sign of “becoming”, an assertion of her rhizomatous identity. Qawas(2013) argues that narrator’s behavior at the end of the story signifies a quest “for some form of truth”(p. 47-48). By refusing to submit her identity to the “rest cure” treatment, the narrator “has followed her own logic, her own perceptions, her own projects . . . in which madness is seen as a kind of transcendent sanity” (Treichler, 1984,p.67).Hence, the “intended effect” of the story, writes Jane F. Thraikill (2002), “was to provide verbal “shock therapy” for proponents of the rest cure” (p. 529).Thus, Jane’s identity is no longer is entangled in the problem of “ I”, itis not handcuffed by any law, rather it is in a state of constant ‘flux’, in a ceaseless motion of ‘becoming’, it is a ‘rhizome’, facilitating a non- hierarchical network.

4. Conclusion

Jane's liberation is temporary and short lived because her rhizomatous identity will expose her to more intense medical treatment. The cliché labels psychotic, schizophrenic would taciturnly try to overpower her "desiring-machines"; entangling her "partial objects" to form homogenous connections, and forcing her "body without organs" to do mechanical recording of the same. Her rhizomatous identity is at war with itself, and antipsychotic drugs, isolation in mental asylums would only deteriorate the process of "becoming". And finally, the flux of identity would be fixed in accordance to an overarching principle. To culminate in the words of Adrienne Rich from her poem *Sources* (1983) which articulates Jane's silent screams as:

When

I speak of an end to suffering I don't mean anesthesia.
I mean knowing the world, and my place in it, not in
order to stare with bitterness or detachment (35).

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Dr. Preeti Puri is an Assistant Professor at Dr. B. R. Ambedkar National Institute of Technology, Jalandhar in the Department of Humanities and Management, and Senate Member IIIT Una. Her forte is Literary Theory and Criticism.

Ms. Shefali is an Assistant Professor at DAV University. Her forte is Literary Theory and Criticism, Middle-Eastern Fiction, and Cultural Stories.
