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The Wallpaper is Torn; the Wall Remains to be Demolished: An Appraisal of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* as an Early Feminist Text

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Abstract:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is one such text, which despite being 'merely' a short story, has come to enjoy a canonical status in the feminist literary discourse. From Hardy to Henry James, from Ibsen to Tolstoy – numerous authors have highlighted various aspects of the stifled female generation of the late nineteenth century. However, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, we find a woman author speaking for herself and for women at large. The story makes use of and yet goes beyond the gothic paraphernalia and the rather handy theme of 'mad' women to register its protest against the then claustrophobic Victorian domestic milieu. The symbolic victory of the woman at the end of the story comes at the cost of her sanity. However, possibly no more wholesome avenue of female triumph was available to her. With an unsentimental, suggestive and powerful narrative, Gilman here delivers her tour de force.

Introduction:

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* has become a canonical text in the history of American literature as well as feminist movements. Gilman's story came out at a critical juncture -- in 1892, when the hidebound structures of Victorianism had started facing challenges and subversions. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a spurt in women-centric, or at least pro-women, writings in different genres of literature as well as by litterateurs of different nationalities -- from Thomas Hardy in England to Tolstoy in Russia, from Ibsen in Norway to Gilman in the U.S.A. The final destiny that various heroines of this era face may not be delectable. Hardy's Tess is awarded capital punishment. Tolstoy's Anna throws herself before a running train and commits suicide. Ibsen's Nora leaves her husband, leaving the audiences wonder what happens to her afterwards. The female protagonist in Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* also ends up deranged. Nevertheless, the message is well-registered in all the cases.

To today's reader, *The Yellow Wallpaper* would appear as Gilman's version of 'the mad woman in the attic'. This expression was, of course, made famous Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar by their book of this title. The title given by Gilbert and Gubar refer to the state and status of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*. Interestingly, in their book, Gilbert and Gubar also briefly dwell on Gilman's story. Gilbert and Gubar call Gilman's story 'a paradigmatic tale' of 'female confinement and escape' which underlines 'the anxiety-ridden connections between what women writers tend to see as their parallel confinements in texts, houses, and maternal female bodies'. However, unlike *Jane Eyre*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is rather simple in its narrative and construct. It is not intersected by complex issues of race, ethnicity or class like *Jane Eyre* or its postcolonial rewriting *The Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. Its plot is linear and its goal is well-reached. The story is remarkable for its power and final impact.

The short-story *The Yellow Wallpaper* is presented in the first person. A highly perceptive and imaginative woman, the narrator is taken by her physician-husband to spend three months in the up-stairs room of a mansion as a measure of rest-cure. The woman has been suffering from a nervous depression or what her husband John calls 'a slight hysterical tendency'. Practical in the extreme, John forbids her to do any kind of work until she recovers. However, the narrator would like to differ. She verily believes that 'congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good'. Driven by the desperate need to communicate, the narrator takes up pen and ink. For her, language is gateway to liberation.

She thinks through writing she can purge herself of her pent-up anxieties:"...if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me." This is very much in line with what psycho-analysis would claim in later years -- that the repressed anxieties and desires of the writer find expression in the text, and relieve the writer by being contained in the narrative. However, this right to express oneself and to realise oneself is denied the narrator by her husband who strictly forbids her to 'give way to fancy'. It also underlies the more fundamental issue that she has no right to live her life in her own terms. Hence, the moment John comes, the narrator hastily puts away her writing. One recalls that even Jane Austen had to write her *Pride and Prejudice*, as Virginia Woolf puts it in *The Common Reader*, 'stealthily under cover of a creaking door'.

John is not off the mark in sensing that the narrator is psychologically restless and agitated. But the remedy he takes recourse to backfires. That there is something wrong with the working of the narrator's mind becomes clear when she first calls the mansion 'a haunted house' and soon goes on to call it a 'most beautiful place'. The narrator is very sensitive to beauty; she writes: 'There is a DELICIOUS garden!' In her diary entries, the narrator sometimes writes certain words in all capital letters, emphasizing their quality. It may be also indicative of a mind that does not always follow beaten paths.

The narrator underscores John's condescending attitude to her: 'John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.' She highlights John's typically rational mind which prevents him from empathising with her: "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him." The late nineteenth century division between masculine domain of work and the feminine domain of domesticity becomes glaring in John's outdoor activities and the narrator's enforced inactivity. She writes: 'Well, the Fourth of July is over!' The independence of the nation does not necessarily guarantee the independence of its citizens in all valid respects.

John is, however, no cardboard villain. The real problem with John is his all-encompassing authority -- an authority that the patriarchal society has conditioned in him and hence is deemed normal by him. The relationship between John and the narrator is skewed. John looks upon her almost as a plaything and calls her 'a blessed little goose', not unlike Torvald in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, who pampers Nora, calls her a 'skylark', but does not allow her wings to fly. As for John, he allows the narrator that much freedom, if at all, which he thinks will work wonders on her. John, with his clinical rationality, treats the narrator as a case, caters only to herphysical needs and starves her imaginative mind, forgetting that she is

after all a human being with a mind of her own. One recalls another American writer John Steinbeck's short story *The Chrysanthemums* where material-minded Henry does not understand the sensitive, creative mind of his wife, Elisa. While Elisa can only weep in silence and at best register a muted protest, the female protagonist in Gilman is capable of assuming a fierce avatar.

Noticeably, John is not alone in the story in trying to pin the narrator down to a particular life-style. The narrator's brother and even another woman like John's sister are on John's side. They are all representatives of a patriarchal society at large which compels even an intellectually capable woman to act out a cut-out role. The narrator is forced to repress her articulatory and liberating self and conform to the stereotypical roles of wife, woman and mother assigned to her by the then society. Toril Moi writes in *Sexual/Textual Politics*: "Women are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness, and instead must seek to conform to the patriarchal standards imposed on them." For Gilman's female protagonist, this divided self-aggravates her psychosis. She confides to the reader, though not to her husband:"I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time." Her boredom, ennui, loneliness and search for release remind us of Sylvia Plath's disturbing poems like *The Bee-Box* and *The Moon and the Yew Tree* where the speaker, likewise, feels desperately cooped up in a stifling praxis.

Disallowed to flower, the narrator's mind comes to fixate on an otherwise nondescript and tattered wallpaper: 'I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before'. The wall itself is suggestive of confinement and restrictions. The colour of the wallpaper is yellow -- not bright beautiful yellow, but 'a smouldering unclean yellow'. The repulsive yellow colour is obviously suggestive of the devitalised life the narrator is leading under compulsion. It is possibly also representative of the jaundiced attitude John as well as the society harbours towards women like the narrator. What catches the narrator's eyes and heightens her irritation is the shapeless pattern of the wallpaper. She is pissed off in the extreme by the'sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin'. She narrates:"the lame uncertain curves…suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions". This description for shadows her own fate to a significant extent. Like the curves in the pattern, she also destroys herself in 'unheard of contradictions' at the end of the story. The narrator's suicidal tendency also surfaces time and time again: 'To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise'. On its first publication, The Yellow Wallpaper caught much attention for its gothic elements. This gothic element serves an

important function regarding the narrator's derangement. Elisabeth Wurtz aptly points out: "The setting sends the message that the narrator's psychological problems lie not within herself…This finding is vital information one must keep at the back of one's mind when scrutinizing the cause and character of the protagonist's breakdown."

Noticeably, the lack of proper pattern and shape which exasperates the narratoris a projection of the narrator's equally shapeless and torn-apart life at the moment. What is more important in the story is the fact that the woman finds a projection of her own cooped up persona in the wallpaper. She imagines that a woman is imprisoned behind that wallpaper and desperately struggling to break free and come out of it. She writes about the pattern: "…worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be." The woman, in her neurotic condition, takes it as her duty to ensure the 'release' of that woman tossing inside the wallpaper.

The woman's free-flowing imagination reaches a climactic manifestation in the final scene when she pounces upon the wallpaper and tears it open in order to free the other woman: 'Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor.' The narrator's identification with her repressed other is now complete. In one sense, the narrator has now inched dangerously closer to lunacy. Seen from another viewpoint, it is a liberating finale. When John comes, her firm words to her are: "I've got out at last…in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" This symbolic liberty is individual as well as plural -- that of her gender. Her wild outburst comes as a shock to John and makes him faint. In a final gesture pregnant with signification, the narrator cowers over the unconscious body of John. It is a symbolic triumph over those forces of patriarchy which have so long made her creep. If she had to creep, John now lies flat.

The narrator is nameless. She can be any woman. In the very opening sentence, the narrator had made it clear that it is a tale of ordinary people -- of 'mere ordinary people like John and myself'. By the time the story nears its close, it becomes clear that this is a tale characteristic of not just this 'ordinary' couple, but of plenty others out there. She narrates: 'there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast' and wonders 'if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did'. The present tense narration 'come out' signifies that this is not any one-off event; it is the recurring scenario.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the remonstration of Gilman's female protagonist against a 'man-made' world resonates in the corridors of feminist discourse. That this frenzied protest was not futile was proved by the gradual liberation of the society at the turn of the twentieth century. When the voice is stifled, it turns into fury. In Gilman's hand, the wallpaper is torn; the wall remains to be demolished in the hand of succeeding generation of writers.

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