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“Dead Paper”: A Study of the Trauma of Therapeutic Fallacy in Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”

Aditi Bandyopadhyay

Abstract

Patriarchy is a multifaceted concept and when we examine it through feminist discourse, it loses its authority. Patriarchy aborts all avenues of individuation for women and engulfs her into the complex web of domesticity, thereby glorifying all forms of self-abnegation. A close study of the intertwined concepts of ‘marriage’ and ‘motherhood’ within the institution of patriarchy, gives birth to further research about the analysis of the inter-related concepts of ‘anonymity’ and ‘madness’ with respect to “the great confinement” of women. Literary accounts have often been the rich storehouses of the physical and emotional response of the patients and this has often been an eye opener to the medical professionals. Many autobiographical accounts examine and document the inhuman nature of the patriarchal modes of medical treatment given to women, especially in case of treating hysteria. This paper is a critical investigation into these interlocking concepts, as reflected in the autobiographical short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The story unveils the failure of the inhuman “rest cure” treatment suggested to the patients of postpartum depression. The therapeutic fallacy of the patriarchal modes of treatment prescribed for women, as revealed in the text under consideration, becomes even more complex when we view it through Foucauldian paradigms. Ironically, the traumatized unnamed woman narrator, who becomes the representative of nineteenth century women, rebels against patriarchy and ultimately finds her freedom through insanity. Accordingly, when we dissolve the patriarchal prejudices of gender-based binaries, “the great confinement” of the ‘feminine’ explodes and the ‘female’ is born.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Rest- Cure, Therapeutic fallacy, Trauma, Freedom.

Introduction

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;
Man for the sword and for the needle she;
Man with the head and woman with the heart;
Man to command and woman to obey,
All else is confusion. (Tennyson, 1999)

Patriarchy is a multifaceted concept and when we examine it through feminist discourse, it loses its authority. Patriarchy aborts all avenues of individuation for women and engulfs her into the complex web of domesticity, thereby glorifying all forms of self-abnegation. This finds substantiation in the Bible, where God commands Eve – “. . . thy desire shall be to thy husband

and he shall rule over thee” (The Holy Bible, Genesis 3, p.16). A close study of the intertwined concepts of ‘marriage’ and ‘motherhood’ within the institution of patriarchy, gives birth to further research about the analysis of the inter-related concepts of ‘anonymity’ and ‘madness’ with respect to “the great confinement” (Foucault, 2001, p.35) of women.

Literature documents and analyzes the socio-political, cultural and several such aspects of the era which it talks about. Health humanities become an interesting area of research in this regard. Literary accounts have often been the rich storehouses of the physical and emotional response of the patients and this has often been an eye opener to the people belonging to the medical sciences, whether it be doctors or scientists. Many autobiographical accounts examine and document the inhuman nature of the patriarchal modes of medical treatment given to women, especially in case of treating hysteria.

Nineteenth Century America was a revolutionary period in terms of reforms. Activists and writers like Clarissa Harlowe Barton (1821-1912), Lucretia Mott (1793-1880), Lucy Stone (1818- 1893) and Carrie Chapman Catt (1859-1947) were voicing their concerns about the rights of women. They wanted to highlight the patriarchal fear of the progressive women, who were isolated as transgressors and as women overpowered by evil spirits. Elizabeth Candy Stanton (1815- 1902) and Susan. B. Anthony (1820-1906) remain the pioneering American feminists who were the stalwarts of the incredibly revolutionizing Seneca Falls meet. Sojourner Truth (...-1883) voiced her concern for black women, who were being marginalized in the fight for women’s rights by the white women. Dorothea Dix (1802-1887) remains a major figure as the Nineteenth Century American health-worker who showed her concern for the mentally ill patients and created the first-generation American mental asylums. As a nurse she did a lot of research by interviewing mental patients and thereby wrote several books to prove that mentally ill people needed more sympathy and company rather than confinement. Her sustained efforts in this regard changed the way of seeing and treating the mentally ill patients.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman examines the irreversible negative repercussions of the “rest-cure” treatment on a woman’s psyche. The text remains a major document on studying the emotional response of a patient suffering from depression to the “rest- cure” treatment. By revealing the fallacy of the therapeutic process developed by Dr. Weir. S, Mitchell, Gilman proves that the patriarchal representation of a woman’s psyche was absolutely illogical and false. The fallacy of this medical treatment was further revealed as Mitchell realized his fault and changed his way of treating depressed women after reading Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Jane F. Thraikill in her essay titled “Doctoring ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” observes: “For as I will explain, Gilman’s historical moment is marked by the incursion of the literary into the medical, within the nascent discourse of psychotherapeutics” (Thraikill, 2002, p.527).

This paper is a critical investigation into these interlocking concepts, as reflected in the autobiographical short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The story unveils the failure of the inhuman “rest cure” treatment suggested to the patients of postpartum depression. The therapeutic fallacy of the patriarchal modes of treatment prescribed for women, as revealed in the text under consideration, becomes even more complex when we view it through Foucauldian paradigms. Ironically, the traumatized unnamed woman narrator, who becomes the representative of nineteenth century women, rebels against patriarchy and ultimately finds her freedom through insanity. Accordingly, when we dissolve the patriarchal prejudices of gender- based binaries, “the great confinement” of the ‘feminine’ (Moi, 1997, p.91) explodes and the ‘female’ is born.

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Study of Gilman’s Literary Response to the Therapeutic Fallacy of Rest-Cure

“The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is her literary response to the trauma faced by her after being subjected to the rest-cure treatment by Dr. Wier S. Mitchell. The story examines the traumatic claustrophobic existence of women in the patriarchal world by raising a plethora of feminist issues. We notice how Gilman voices her feelings about the power relationship between the sexes, gendered discourse, domesticity, motherhood, confinement, sexuality, creativity, anonymity, and madness by projecting plight of the nameless woman narrator. Gilman draws our attention to these issues by interrogating the position of woman within the patriarchal institution of marriage, which is one of the major pillars that ensures the “everlastingness” of the patriarchal rule. The subjugated status of woman in this relationship is clearly revealed as the narrator says, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage” (Gilman, 1998, p.41). “Representation of the world”, Simone de Beauvoir writes, “is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth.” She further asserts:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine (Beauvoir, 1997, p.295).

In the text under consideration, Gilman reveals a case study of these themes moulded within the perfect blend of form and feeling.

Compositional Background of the Story

She establishes a woman at the center of her fictive world and presents a story which she wrote from first-hand experience. In 1887, Gilman was diagnosed with neurasthenia after childbirth. Dr. S Weir Mitchell suggested her to undertake the “rest cure” treatment. She was advised to keep herself away from all kind of mental, physical, and social activities and “never to touch pen, brush or pencil again” (Bauer, 1998, p.337) as long as she lived. It is important to note that in an essay titled “Wear and Tear,” Mitchell wrote: “It were better not to educate girls at all between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, unless it can be done with careful reference to their bodily health. To-day, the American woman is, to speak plainly, too often physically unfit for her duties as woman, and is perhaps of all civilized females the least qualified to undertake those weightier tasks which tax so heavily the nervous system of man” (Mitchell, 1872, p. 436). After three months of this treatment, she almost landed on the brink of madness and decided to discontinue it. As she freed herself from Mitchell’s mode of treatment, her condition improved.

Gilman’s Narrator as her Mouthpiece

The narrator, who is her mouthpiece wishes, “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more stimulus” (Gilman, 1998, p.42). She observes, “Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change would do me good ... I did write for a while in spite of them” (Gilman, 1998, p.42). However, the post-traumatic stress of this treatment plagued her throughout her life. The motive of this treatment was to promote domesticity. Being a creative person, she revolted against it and wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” to “save people from being driven crazy” (Bauer, 1998, p.349). The story mirrors and interrogates patriarchal conditions which drive a ‘normal’ woman into a ‘mad’ woman. Juliet Mitchell rightly observes, “Hysteria is the woman’s simultaneous

acceptance and refusal of the organization of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism” (Eagleton, 1998, p.116).

“The Yellow Wallpaper” dissects the patriarchal organization and brings to our notice the discrimination and injustice that women face within its shackles. The story eloquently dramatizes the emptiness in the lives of cloistered women by projecting the “dead paper” or the journal of the unnamed woman narrator, which almost gains the significance of her confidant by becoming a silent listener of her plight. She says, “...but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind” (Gilman, 1998, p.41). Reflexively, it voices the stifled thoughts and anxieties of the narrator. It projects her tortured mindscape and makes us see the repercussions of the meaningless norms of patriarchy imposed upon women who wish to have a mind of their own. It reveals the unseen crisis in her life, which apparently seems to be a period of comfort given to the patients of “rest cure.” The “dead paper” reminds us of Mrinal’s diary in Rabindranath Tagore’s “Streer Patra.” In Tagore’s narrative Mrinal is not only beautiful but she is intelligent as well. She has a mind of her own and thereby she rebels against her patriarchal family. In fact, her decision to leave her husband’s house and stay in the Jagannath temple at Puri becomes an act of freeing herself in order to become a role model for all other women of her temperament in the contemporary society. This further brings the image of Nora’s tarentella dance followed by her slamming of the door on her husband’s face in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. Gilman’s narrator, Tagore’s Mrinal and Ibsen’s Nora refuse to “fit in” within the patriarchal codes of living as the ‘feminine’. As Gilman’s narrator says, “He (John) knows there is no reason to suffer and that satisfies him” (Gilman, 1998, p.44), we are forced to think about the psychological trauma which she faces, as she refuses to “fit in” (Gokak, 2005, p.272) within the mask that is forced on her.

In patriarchy, man regards himself as the standard against which women are judged. In this “power structured” organization of society where “it is the birthright whereby male rules females” (Millet, 1970, p.23), women are bound by their roles as wives and mothers. She is almost reduced to a dehumanized automaton that is considered to be unfit for any task that is based on reason and intellect. At the very beginning of the short story, we are informed that the narrator has been brought into a “colonial mansion” and this reminds us of the subjugated “slave” (Mill, 1997, p.157) like position of a woman within the institution of marriage in patriarchy. Moreover, the room in which she is placed has been selected by her husband, who is a doctor. The helpless state of this creative narrator is revealed as she says, “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression- a slight hysterical tendency- what is one to do?” (Gilman, 1998, p.41).

The stratification of roles on the basis the sex of an individual is one of the major patriarchal strategies which restricts women to the private sphere of the ‘domestic.’ This ideology propagates the notion of ‘ideal womanhood’ and glorifies the concept of ‘domestic heroism’. Within this system, women who prioritize individual aspirations and strive for emancipation, are caught in the dilemma of making a choice between the social roles assigned to them and the real self they want to be. This psychological turmoil results in an identity crisis and thereby creates in her, the feeling of ‘anonymity.’ Women who rebel and choose the path of individuation are seen as transgressors.

The text also raises the issue of the “anxiety of influence” which haunted the women writers as they suffered the lack of having literary mothers. While analysing the situation of creative women in patriarchy, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note:

The female poet does not experience the “anxiety of influence” in the same way as her

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male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male ... Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority, they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel /monster) drastically conflict with her own self of herself – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity... Thus the “anxiety of influence” that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary “anxiety of authorship” – the radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will destroy her (Gilbert, 2007, p.48).

The narrator of Gilman’s story repents, “It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work” (Gilman, 1998, p.46).

The crisis is worsened when she realizes that her state is that of a subaltern, not only in the society but also within the so-called secure space of the ‘domestic.’ John trivializes her and calls her in diminutive terms as “blessed little goose” or “little girl,” as if she is a child whose opinions do not have any importance. The narrator is deeply hurt as she is treated as the ‘other’ in the apparently secure microcosmic space of her family. We realize that the comfort which has been provided to her is a trap. She makes a suggestive statement as she exclaims, “John was never nervous in his life ... It is so hard to talk to John about my case, because he is so wise” (Gilman, 1998, p.50). This captures the temperamental differences caused between men and women by social conditioning. Her state of imprisonment and helplessness within her own family highlights her state of marginalization and makes us realize the cause of her depression.

Jane, being a woman, too, fails to understand the woman narrator’s suffering. Moreover, ironically, she becomes an obstacle in the path of the progressive woman narrator’s search for freedom. She informs us, “She (Jane, John’s sister) is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which makes me sick” (Gilman, 1998, p.47). We find a probable explanation to this ironic behaviour of Jennie when we examine the tools used by patriarchy to maintain its empire. Within the institution of patriarchy, women are nurtured and socialized to act in accordance with its codified norms. This weakens the bond of sisterhood among women and ignorantly they act in cooperation with their oppressors to remain oppressed forever. In this context we are reminded of the observation made by bell hooks:

Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are “natural enemies,” that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another (Meyers, 1997, p.485).

Patriarchy employs the tool of surveillance to control the lives of women. They are conditioned to be ‘feminine’ so that they remain chained within the expected roles of ‘marrying’ and ‘mothering.’ The essence of the ‘feminine’ is clearly projected in Prudence B Saur’s advice book titled *Maternity: A Book for Every Wife and Mother*, which states, A woman’s life is made up of little pleasures, of little task, of little cares, and little duties, but which when added together, make a grand total of human happiness; she is not expected to do any grand work; her province lies in a contrary direction, in gentleness, in cheerfulness, in contentment, in housewifery, in care and management of her children, in sweetening her husband’s cup of life...these are emphatically a heritage, her jewels which help to make up her

crown of glory...Home is the kingdom of woman (Bauer, 1998, p.154). This highlights the life of a married woman as a caged life where she is reduced to a dehumanized figure. To use Foucault's term, women are reduced to "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1995, p.136), who join the group of "the manipulable body...that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" according to the laws of patriarchy. They do what they are expected to do and precisely, they do it in the way patriarchy demands it to be done. Women are "caught up in power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault, 1995, p.136). In this regard Foucault's analysis of the "making" of soldiers sounds very appropriate:

Let us take the ideal figure of the soldier...the soldier has become something that can be made; out of formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture can be gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all time, turning silently into the automatism of habit (Foucault, 1995, p.135).

Similar is the nurturing of women in patriarchy. Women, then, constantly suffer from the anxiety of being observed and accordingly they are forced to observe and follow the meaningless norms codified for them. Further, it is interesting to note that the patriarchal modes of conditioning women to ensure the continuity of its empire, can be studied with respect to the Foucauldian analysis of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, where "visibility is a trap" (Foucault, 1995, p.200). Gilman's story problematizes this aspect of the patriarchal organization as she subtly foregrounds the trapped condition of women through the symbolism of the "yellow wallpaper" which surrounds the woman narrator. This is reflected when she observes, "John is beginning to notice. I don't like the look in his eyes" (Gilman, 1998, p.56), as she begins to peel off the paper in order to evacuate the trapped woman. Further, she views the wallpaper as an individual who observes her with "two bulbous eyes," when her husband or Jane is not around- "This paper looks as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!" (Gilman, 1998, p. 46).

Gilman's woman narrator fails to tolerate her secluded state and she begins to write her secret journal. She emerges as a victim who has the qualities of a new woman. This becomes evident as she takes a decision and asserts her identity despite being in the victimized state. She says, "I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief" (Gilman, 1998, p.49). Gilman makes a multilayered analysis of the narrator's psyche as she relates her condition with the "woman" behind "the bars" on "the yellow wallpaper" who "seemed to shake the pattern, just as it wanted to get out" (Gilman, 1998, p.50). As she begins to hallucinate, the wallpaper becomes a complex symbol. By employing the technique of palimpsest Gilman presents the "wallpaper" as a text which hides a sub text. Accordingly, the narrator interprets the intricate designs of the "wallpaper" and observes:

The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions...This wall-paper has a kind of sub-pattern... I can see a strange sort of formless provoking sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design...it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind the pattern... At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars... The front pattern does move and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!... And she is all the time trying to climb through the pattern- it strangles them so; I think that is why it has so many heads (Gilman, 1998, pp. 51-52).

The image of "many heads" reflects the imprisoned state of women in patriarchy. The trapped woman who creeps, is the narrator's double who struggles to earn freedom from the

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meaningless existence of being a “doll” residing in the “doll’s house” (Ibsen, 1992). The movement of “creeping” makes the caged woman resemble an animal that has been locked up in a cage. She undertakes the task of following “the pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion” (Gilman, 1998, p. 48). She endeavors to help the caged woman to make her free. The narrator, thus, declares her unvoiced rebellion against patriarchy. In this process she gradually descends into madness. As we examine the psychological tensions faced by the woman narrator, we find a probable explanation in Elaine Showalter’s term “domestication of insanity” (Showalter, 1987, p.4). Further Showalter observes, “Biographies and letters of gifted women who suffered mental breakdowns have suggested that madness is the price women artists have had to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male-dominated culture” (Showalter, 1987, p 4).

It is highly striking that Gilman keeps the text open ended. To some extent the picture presented at the end is disturbing as well. However, as the woman narrator shouts “I have got out at last in spite of you and Jane” (Gilman, 1998, p.58), we realize that she has successfully discovered the pattern of the wallpaper and she has freed the woman behind the bars. On the other hand, John faints on seeing his wife in this condition. Probable reason behind John’s reaction may be his inability to face defeat in the hands of his wife, as he is the doctor husband who is the ‘master’ in the relationship. Maybe, he cannot believe the failure of the patriarchal mode of treatment of “rest cure.” Maybe he faints because of the guilt of pushing his wife towards insanity. Maybe he faints because he is too scared of seeing his wife’s abnormal state. Perhaps a clue to solve this mystery lies in an observation made by Gilman:

The real purpose of the story was to reach Dr. Weir S. Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways. I sent him a copy as soon as it came out, but got no response. However, many years later, I met someone who knew close friends of Dr. Mitchell who said he had told them that he had changed his treatment of nervous prostration since reading “The Yellow Wallpaper” ... I have not lived in vain (Bauer, 1998, p. 349).

Her secret journal reflects the inner recesses of her desires. The state of madness is a symbolic victory for the narrator. She is reborn into the state of realizing her potential and openly acknowledges it, “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!” She has crossed the obstacles on her road to individuation. We are reminded of Foucault’s explanation of “madness” as a trait that can “by its own virtue bring to light the real problem, which can then be truly resolved. It conceals beneath error the secret enterprise of truth... It hides and manifests, it utters truth and falsehood, it is light and shadow.” (Foucault, 2001, p.30-32). So, when seen in the light of Foucault’s analysis of “history” in association with his study of “power,” madness can be something beyond its clinical form. This provides an explanation to the patriarchal denunciation of creative women as rebels or hysterics. As Gilman’s narrator refuses to surrender to patriarchy, in her state of madness, the new woman is born who breaks her cage and paves her road to freedom by trampling upon the patriarchal strategies which demean women.

Conclusion

Gilman champions the cause of true art as she voices her iconoclastic thoughts on women’s liberation by presenting a traumatic tale of repression unfolded through vivid use of images, symbols, and intricate narrative tools. Moreover, the story has a universal appeal as it captures the trauma of women, who have a mind of their own in spite of residing in the patriarchal world.

The short story interweaves several anxieties of creative women in patriarchy. It raises many issues regarding women's liberation and remains a seminal text in feminist studies especially with respect to its contribution in health humanities. The essence of the text is best analyzed by Gilbert and Gubar, as they read it as the portrayal of "anxiety inducing connections between what women writers tend to see as their parallel confinements in texts, houses and maternal female bodies- Charlotte Perkins Gilman brought them all together in 1890 in a striking story of female confinement and escape, a paradigmatic tale which seems to tell the story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their 'speechless woe'" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2007, p.89). Above all, the text remains a cultural document of the fallacy of the therapeutic measures of the patriarchal ideology and practice with respect to its treatment of hysteria.

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Bio-note

Aditi Bandyopadhyay is presently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Birbhum Mahavidyalaya, Suri. Her areas of interest include Gender Studies, Partition Literature and Travel Writing.

Email Id: aditi.bandyopadhyay@rediffmail.com

