

'THE YELLOW WALLPAPER' BY CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN AS THE AVANT-GARDE IN PYSCHIATRY

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ABSTRACT

Since ages, the cure for any mental illness and disorder, for instance, as prescribed by psychologists and psychiatrists to the patients is forceful isolation. Firstly, to identify a person suffering with some mental issue was itself a Herculean task then. People fundamentally were not aware if it's a serious problem, denied to put their heart out and psychiatry, which was then emerging did not pay much heed to the techniques and methods to be followed.

At this point of time, in the 19th century, came out a revolutionary work titled 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by an American Novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It is a semi-autobiographical short story about what is now called as 'postpartum depression'. This short story presents to the world the life of a mentally sick woman. What is in focus should not be about this woman but the way in which she has been treated by her psychiatric doctor-husband John. The unnamed woman in this work can be viewed as the microcosm of the macroscopic mentally ill, in and around 19th century. This particular paper on 'The Yellow Wallpaper' focuses on the adverse treatment labeled upon women in 19th century; the need and urge to refine it. This article examines the aspect of gendered trauma involved in a psychiatric treatment and warns the dangers of the 'rest cure' therapy. The present paper slams the treatment of confinement and inactivity as completely baseless.

Keywords: Avant-garde, postpartum depression, isolation, American feminist literature.

Introduction

The cure for mental illness has been evolving through centuries. In and around 19th century, there existed the Asylum culture. These asylums, the dark dungeons for pauper lunatics, which were actually supposed and meant to strengthen the psyche, in return increased the mental stress of the inmates owing to the miserable conditions existed there like overcrowding, lack of proper food and light. 'The Madhouse', in Spanish, *Casa de locos* by Francisco Goya is an oil on painting, produced between 1812 and 1819, depicts the grave conditions at a mental asylum. This painting, shocks the 21st century viewers, as it just does not portray lunatic people but lunatics at discrete stages of madness. Such a catastrophic depiction! This view should not be just taken to know the lunatic asylums at that time, but to be taken as the need to reform such asylums. On the other hand, home

isolation was gaining popularity. One such portrayal of isolation is seen in the work 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. This story is backed by Gilman's very own experience as a patient.

The Yellow Wallpaper, published in the year 1892 evolved as a rebellious work of art, packed with the ineffective treatment stamped upon an unnamed narrator by her husband. In this American feminist literature, Charlotte Perkins Gilman has justly made the protagonist of the story, an unnamed woman. This reminds readers, the grave issue of identity crisis. It is only the narrator who is unnamed (just as in Sultana's Dreams by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain) and everyone else in this story have their respective identity. Right from her husband John, the couple's housekeeper and John's sister, Jennie to the caretaker of narrator's new born baby, Mary.

The narrator of the yellow wallpaper, a new mother begins the story by penning it down in her journal. This work begins with the narrator's opinion on the house they are about to move in. In the very second sentence, the narrator finds the mansion strange as she says, "A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house..." (Gilman). As the story advances, reader is certain that the narrator has twofold opinion on the house as she finds the mansion both strange and the most beautiful place. This projects the basic fact about the dilemma that exists in her very mind.

Unmindful character – John:

John, the narrator's husband is a physician and perhaps, an extremely practical man. He rubs his therapeutics onto his patient-wife, without being aware of her thoughts and feelings. But this cannot be the valid method for rooting out hysteria. Therapists have to work closely with patients, understand them and move together in the same direction. John, in turn does the contrary. He remains unheard to his wife's requests. He forbids her from favorite activity i.e., writing, until she is back to normal. In practicality, nervous disorders heal quicker when the patients' gets immersed doing their beloved past time activity.

"When you're depressed, you may feel like you can't accomplish anything. That makes you feel worse about yourself. To push back, set daily goals for yourself." says Ian Cook, Director of the Depression Research and Clinic Program at UCLA.

But the treatment offered to the narrator is, "phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics" and she insists that, "Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good." (Gilman).

Forbidding the narrator from writing, John even remains unheard of the narrator's wish to stay downstairs. He compels her to stay in the room in which the narrator does not have a liking for. She describes the room's tone and shade as, "The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight." (Gilman)

In any depression case, environment and ambiance does play key role in the mental development of a patient. It is the prime duty of a physician to know how the patient feels about the place he/she lives at! The physician husband John, even though aware that his wife is really uncomfortable constantly proclaims "You know the place is doing you good." (Gilman)

With people around/ away from people:

'The Yellow Wallpaper' cautions readers the perils of rest cure. John alienated his wife from their new born baby, writing and even relatives. The near effective treatment for nervous disorders is allowing the patients to spend some quality time with family and friends. Frederic Newman in his article entitled 'The role of the family in treating the very depressed' says,

"When patients are well enough to remain at home, no matter how irritable they may be, they should not be sequestered in a room away from their children and the rest of their family and the everyday business of the household."

John agrees for the visit of Cousin Henry and Julia only after his wife becomes well. Grave absurdity!

The Yellow Wallpaper – Aversion to Affinity:

The narrator initially tries all means and ends to abandon the mansion but later on finds herself adjusted to it, but what really scares her is the yellow wallpaper in the room, as she says "I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper." (Gilman). The minute details, the narrator puts forth about the wallpaper is enough to estimate the level of obsession the narrator has on the wallpaper. Such as:

"There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside-down. I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other...The wallpaper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother—they must have had perseverance as well as hatred." (Gilman)

The narrator's keen observance of the wallpaper made her subconsciously imagine something strange hidden in the wallpaper. Her imagination level has gone beyond measure, "This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then...But in the places where it isn't faded, and where the sun is just so, I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to sulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design." (Gilman)

It is now the narrator started developing serious hysteria. It is at this point of time; the narrator generates particular liking towards the wallpaper. This wallpaper that made her skeptical before, has now become the only reason to stay in the room. She says, "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because* of the wallpaper." (Gilman) This furnishes the very fact that the narrator is mentally deteriorating.

The narrator's favorite activity which has been writing before, has now been shifted to analyzing the pattern of the wallpaper. Keen into this, the narrator finds "...like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern." If at least John would have paid attention at this moment, the narrator would have been saved from the serious clutches of nervous disorder. Poor soul! Even though the narrator tried explaining strange animosity towards wallpaper, John as always did not pay attention to her. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, rightly presents the superiority complex that existed in the 19th century. Women were left unheard like the narrator being condemned every time she speaks up. As days passed, the narrator entangles herself to decode the pattern even more and decides to solve the mystery behind it before she leaves this mansion.

Not just the wallpaper, the narrator even tries to analyze the odor creeping out of the wallpaper. "Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like." (Gilman) And finally, the narrator is satisfied to find out the fact that there are woman/women behind the wallpaper. And now the only task left for the narrator is to free the mysterious women behind the wallpaper. Locked herself in, the narrator succeeded in peeling off the wallpaper, "then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor." (Gilman).

The narrator who has been in the clutches of the society, ultimately got freed by identifying herself with the woman behind the yellow wallpaper. The narrator started to "I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder." (Gilman), as her husband John enters the room. The zenith of nervous disorder is found when the narrator says, "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!" (Gilman). A woman is turned into a near animal now, creeping across the floor. With this gloomy sight, John faints and the narrator creeps endlessly. This text poses the question that whether readers should feel victorious that the narrator (19th century depressed women) have finally won over the superiority of men or should the readers feel ashamed of the failed psychiatric treatment?

Conclusion

Charlotte Perkins Gilman has produced the right text at the right time, spearheading the need for a change in psychiatric treatment. This work undoubtedly can be termed as The Avant- Garde in psychiatry. Being

a proto-feminist work of art, this short story addresses the concerns of 19th century, particularly of the depressed women and the fallacious treatment they underwent. The Yellow Wallpaper stands as path-breaking text for the centuries to come. Through the post-partum depression of the unnamed narrator, Gilman has proved that rest cure as a treatment is dangerous and often leads to even more psychological disorder/death. Moreover, it showcases the bitter truth of the existing masculine attitude towards women and the strong need to refine it. The yellow wallpaper reveals to the audience the ill-effects, if women are left unheard.

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