



Female Madness As Resistance: A Feminist Re-Examination Of Women's Mental Health In Literature Through The Narratives Of Female Authors.

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Repression of women manifests itself in literary narratives through the portrayal of confinement, alienation and isolation that women are faced with. One such texts that document this level of psychological oppression is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), This text serves as an incisive critique of the patriarchal behaviour that has been construed as a tool for controlling and subjugating women and silence their agencies and insights, particularly in the field of mental health, intellectual autonomy, and creative expression. The narrative, which is presented as a journal kept by a lady undergoing the "rest cure," a quaint medical treatment used in the late 19th century to treat mental illnesses in women, addressing the deep psychological damage and alienation that women experience as a result of a culture that routinely marginalises and silences them. Despite being a seemingly insignificant piece of home décor, the titular wallpaper in the narrator's confinement chamber serves as an interconnected metaphor for the suppression of women's voices. After being written off as disorganised and hideous, the wallpaper's designs eventually represent the narrator's imprisonment in patriarchal structures and her the end, albeit, costly, act of defiance.

The wallpaper is allegorical on multiple basis- firstly it represents the narrator's deteriorating mental condition, and secondly, on a broader level it represents the socio-cultural restraints that have been placed upon women. On the surface, the garish wallpaper's disoriented, overpowering, and seemingly absurd design matches the narrator's increasing hyper-fixation and spiral into insanity. But its importance goes beyond the individual; it is a symbol of the "unheard of contradictions" that are present in patriarchal rhetoric. The narrator is silently resisting in the face of the oppressive society by writing in the journal that she refers to as "dead paper", because she doesn't feel comfortable confiding in a living soul. The narrator's husband John frowns upon this act of expression and forbids her to write, but she does so anyway, as an act of a silent rebellion. Throughout the text, John embodies that patriarchal authority and Victorian rationality. Given the medical and social conventions of the late 19th century, his status as a doctor gives him a feeling of indisputable authority. John treats the narrator in a condescending and paternalistic manner, dismissing her feelings and ideas and attributing them to her alleged nervousness and weakness. Under the pretence of safeguarding her health, he insists on the "rest cure," a program that

deprives her of intellectual and creative stimulation. Gilman sarcastically comments on the Victorian male using the air of dramatic irony, noting, “He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction”, while the reader can obviously interpret that John’s behaviour is not loving than it is controlling.

As the narrator starts to identify the figure of a lady trapped within the wallpaper's convoluted designs, the metaphorical significance of the piece reaches its crescendo. The situation of women under patriarchal domination, who are constrained not only by social norms but also by the language and systems that specify their roles, is powerfully symbolised by this trapped woman. The narrator's attempt to free herself and, consequently, all similarly confined women is symbolised by the real and symbolic act of pulling down the wallpaper. But there is a price for this act of liberation: the narrator's mental breakdown highlights the terrible results of defying a society that denies women their independence. The *écriture féminine* idea put out by Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* has a strong resonance with the structure and ideas of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. According to Cixous, patriarchal arrangements in language favour male viewpoints and experiences while excluding women's voices and preventing them from expressing their experienced reality. In order to combat this, she promotes *écriture féminine*, a writing style that defies convention and captures the emotions, rhythms, and physical sensations of women. Although her husband forbids her from writing, alleging it would worsen her mental instability, the narrator surreptitiously logs her thoughts and observations. The battle of women to recover their voices in a language system that is intended to suppress them is reflected in this covert act of disobedience. Cixous advocated for disruptive, embodied language, which is reflected in the narrator’s broken and more incoherent text, which reflects the disintegration of patriarchal order in her perception.

The “rest cure” was essentially an ostensibly curated treatment for women who were experiencing hysteria, or “nervous disorder”. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a semi-autobiographical work since it documents Gilman’s own experience with what would be called “post-partum depression”. In 1887, Gilman underwent medical treatment under Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a famous neurologist of the time, who developed the “rest cure” as the treatment of “nervous prostration” in women. For exercising this treatment, the patient was prescribed with strict bed rest, isolation, and a complete cessation from activities that require intellectual or creative effort, because these activities were viewed as harmful to women’s fragile constitutions. Mitchell criticised “women of independent spirit,” claiming that their pursuit of career or intellectual goals affected their psychological health. He maintained that domesticity was the finest role for women and that venturing outside of it led to mental stress and “nervous depletion.” Under the pretence of medical therapy, his treatment aimed to impose traditional gender roles. Scholar Anne Stiles in her essay *Rest Cure, 1873-1925* remarked while talking about Gilman’s autobiography that, “she depicts Mitchell as a medical villain, and the rest cure as a Gothic torture.” This statement reflects the mistreatment of medical patients and the critique of of medical establishment and the system during the Victorian period. Gilman discusses her own experience with Mitchell's treatment in her memoirs, characterising it as both harmful and ineffectual. Gilman portrays Mitchell as a medical “villain,” but he is more than just a wayward physician—he represents the patriarchal medical system. In this context, the rest cure is seen as a representation of the social forces that aimed to mute, enclose, and control women rather than merely a therapeutic strategy.

The term “Gothic torture” in itself is a term which represents something that is eerie, and almost nightmarish; and when paired with a person with a medical occupation almost becomes a subject to be juxtaposed: a medical authority being associated with torture points towards the duality of the profession and the irony of the “rest cure”. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, although not explicitly naming it, gives the character of John similar characteristics as that of Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell. John’s behaviour towards his wife, the narrator, is the way that a father has towards a child. His behaviour is condescending and controlling, which makes the narrator cautious around him. She cannot express her thoughts in front of him, to a point where she has to hide her journals from him because he has “forbidden” her from writing (refraining from intellectual exercises was a part of the rest cure). The paternalistic ethos of the late 19th

century, when men, especially those in positions of authority like medical practitioners, believed that women were innately weak, illogical, and incapable of making their own decisions, is reflected in his actions. The way John talks to and about his wife, as well as the how he controls every part of her life while claiming to be concerned for her well, are particularly clear examples of this infantilisation. John as a medical professional claims authority over her wife's freedom because there were essentially no rights for women during the Victorian period, and as her husband, he had the ultimate power to overrule her decisions.

The narrator's descent into madness begins with her enforced passivity, which is administered by her spouse, John, who also serves as her doctor gives him two powers over her: as a husband, he represents the patriarchal standards that placed women in subservient positions in Victorian society; as a doctor, he has medical expertise that warrants her confinement. John's treatment of the narrator, which is based on the rest cure created by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, emphasises isolation, inactivity, and submission, depriving her of intellectual stimulation and meaningful agency, depriving her of voice and power, forbidding her from writing or doing anything that would challenge her subservience.

The narrator's psychological deterioration is greatly exacerbated by this systematic repression of her emotional and intellectual needs that are the same in every human being: of expression. She grows more and more detached from reality as a result of being denied creative outlets and the chance to communicate her ideas. Both an act of disobedience and a lifeline to her sanity is her covert journal, where she records her observations and frustrations. However, as her loneliness grows, the notebook documents her increasing instability, characterised by disjointed ideas and an obsession with the yellow wall covering of her room.

One of the main symbols of the narrator's insanity is the titular yellow wallpaper itself. She initially characterises it with slight annoyance, pointing out its disorganised design and disagreeable hue. nevertheless, as she confined, the wallpaper serves a darker semblance, representing her inner struggle. She starts to see a woman trying her best to escape from an imprisoned figure in the wallpaper. The narrator's own sense of helplessness and confinement is reflected in this hallucination, as if she is seeing her own self trying to break through the shackles of the yellow wallpaper, which also appears as a representation of the limitations society places on women. The environment of the room also contributes to the narrator's madness. The placement of the furniture and them being nailed down symbolize rigidity, circumstances that cannot be changed because they seem to be too out of control. Similarly, the barred windows give out a prison-like imagery, symbolizing confinement.

As the narrator's infatuation with the wallpaper grows, it becomes the epicentre of her mental collapse and eventually by the end, she tears up the entire wallpaper and when she declares that she has finally "got out at last", it represents that through her madness was she only able to defy her husband and her traditional place in the society.

Sylvia Plath in her only published semi-auto-biographical novel *The Bell Jar* presents to the audience the character of Esther Greenwood, a girl who appears to be an academic achiever, slowly ascending into womanhood with a full-scholarship and an all-expenses paid job in the glamorous New York City, a lifestyle that is the dream of thousands of women. Yet, Esther seems to appear disillusioned from this glamour and grandeur. This gives away the character to be internally conflicted and disconnected from what society expects from women. She seems to be continuously aware of the invisible pressure that has always been present upon women which limits their ambitions. There is always an implied sense of polarity in a woman's fate- where she can either have a family to fulfil her, or she can have a career in which a need for domesticity will always accompany her. There is a duality of identity, which becomes a struggle that she has to grapple with, where she has the idea of her own identity, versus the identity that the society wants her to be.

As Betty Friedan has mentioned in *The Feminine Mystique*, “The American housewife — freed by science and labour-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth, and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfilment.” A similar dynamic lingers upon Esther’s psyche, like her own personal angel-in-the-house phantom that does not allow her to do whatever she wants to do. After the war, the traditional gender-roles had been revived in America, as a reaction to the Cold War, and the Wartime disruptions. Women, who had entered the workforce in large numbers during World War II, were now encouraged- if not outrightly coerced—to return to their domestic spaces. As a foundation of the suburban ideal, the archetype of the “dutiful wife, devoted mother, and homemaker” came to represent security and wealth. Popular media, official propaganda, and cultural narratives that linked domestic peace with national security, it all perpetuated this image.

Betty Friedan describes the psychological effects of this expectation in *The Feminine Mystique*, where she creates the phrase “the problem that has no name” to refer to the widespread dissatisfaction and identity crisis that women who are restricted to domestic responsibilities face, which had almost taken up a pace like an epidemic. She writes, “Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material...she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: ‘Is this all?’” (*The Feminine Mystique, Chapter I*). This can refer to the significant idea that there is always a gap when it comes to a woman’s identity because the happiness of a woman prescribed by society and the actual reality of women have a rift.

Esther's increasing discontent with the life that has been shown to her reflects this apparent discrepancy between the ideal of happiness prescribed by society and the realities of women's actual experiences. Esther finds herself unable to relate to the route society wants her to take, despite the apparent splendour of her academic achievement and New York profession. As she goes over the role models of womanhood around her- going from Betsy’s clichéd homogeneity to Doreen's wayward indulgence to her mother's utilitarian approach—her disenchantment is evident. Every woman offers a unique strategy for negotiating society’s demands of femininity, but none of these routes feels genuine or satisfying to Esther. Her mother, for instance, her mother’s belief that Esther should pursue shorthand to enforce a stable future also emphasizes that there was a limitation in options available to women as a career. Esther’s rejection of this path reveals her longing for something beyond monetary stability or domestic efficacy. She resents not only the tasks these women play but also the more general social assumption that women should be nurturers and carers. Whether by choice or necessity, she seems to believe the women in her life have adapted to these roles, but they are all, in one way or another, involved in a system that prevents women from discovering their true selves.

Esther’s character is essentially that of a young female writer who has just entered her twenties, which appears to be an age where one just finds themselves to be at the precipice of self-discovery. The concept of identity being a fragmented, incoherent assemblage of options that are presented and laid in front of a person, rather than a fixed presence or essence that belongs to a person. Sylvia Plath has beautifully depicted this fragmentation of potential futures through her infamous fig tree analogy, It is a vision of a fig tree branching out in front of her, each fig representing a potential future for her, which is distinct and desirable. However, this openness of option paralyses Esther, instead of giving her hope. The vastness of her options for creating a secure future stands in stark contrast with Esther’s inability to choose the direction in which she would choose to steer her life’s ship. This uncertainty stems from a much deeper disorientation within her sense of self.

There is also an invisible but very present, intangible presence of societal pressure upon Esther which has caused the distortion in her identity formation. This 1950s prescription for a woman to be a devoted wife and a mother, as pointed out by Friedan is a recurrent factor throughout the novel, because Esther feels obliged to embody the image of the conventional markers of success for a woman, which is an image curated through subjugation of the women. Esther appears to be “starving” because she is

unable to conform to one of the ideals that the society has presented in front of her, as it comes to her as an imposition, rather than something that comes to naturally, something that fits in with her sense of self. Her inability to fit into the proposed societal ideals, the rigid blueprint of womanhood imposed by 1950s culture- results in a profound internal fragmentation and a rooted sense of alienation. Rather than developing organically, her sense of self becomes a battleground where personal aspirations and genuine individuality are constantly pitted against the conflicting and oppressive expectations of domesticity and subjugation. Esther appears to be struggling to embody the conventional ideal of successful a woman, she is left with a distorted, splintered identity that feels incomplete and unsustainable. This dissonance not only starves her of the opportunity to form an authentic self but also leaves her feeling isolated and suffocated by a culture that demands conformity over creativity. Ultimately, the pressure to conform transforms into an existential crisis—one that reflects the broader feminist critique of a society that curtails a woman's right to self-definition. In this context, Esther's internal chaos is both a personal tragedy and a potent commentary on the cultural forces that limit women's potential, exposing the dire cost of having one's identity continuously eroded by external impositions.

One such external imposition seems to be in the form of chastity. Plath calls out the great societal pressure upon women to remain chaste, which is again a tool to control and subjugate women, to keep them in line. In the introduction, the dichotomy between Eve and Lilith was discussed, which mirrors here again in the form of two young ladies- Betsy and Doreen. Betsy represents the idealized, pure woman, while Doreen represents a more liberated, rebellious femininity. These characters become external manifestations of the dichotomy between the submissive 'angel' and the defiant 'monster,' concepts widely represented in literary works. Esther herself seems to be in conflict with these dichotomous representations of the female identity. On one hand, she seems to admire Doreen's non-conformity to the societal rules and her sexual liberation, but at the same time she is aware of the environment around her which ruthlessly scrutinizes and judges women like her. On the other hand, she admires Betsy's innocence as it aligns with the prescription of the society, but conversely, she finds this model of naiveté impossible to obtain. Esther's sexuality and the conflict within her sexual identity also played the role of a catalyst in her mental unwinding. Despite being socialised to think that such urges are not feminine, she wishes sexual independence and liberation. Esther has intense bewilderment and alienation as a result of this contradiction since she is unable to balance her individual objectives with the roles the world expects her to play. Her mental stress is increased by thinking about these disparities, which causes her to doubt who she is and where she fits in the world.

The narrativization of both the texts is in the first-person viewpoint and immerses into a psychological subtext, provided by their respective narrators, and the disintegration of the self is mirrored in both the texts. Gilman's text is accompanied with a sense of immediacy and intimacy, her loss of her thoughts and autonomy being a gradual loss is mirrored with the very slow but apparent disintegration through her fragmented, and often repetitive language being a reflection of the deterioration of her mental state but also her struggle to articulate an experience that is continually undermined by external authorities. On the other hand, in *The Bell Jar*, Plath has employed her signature confessional, stream-of-consciousness style, disrupting the linear process of narrativization as Esther seems to be continuously aware of her memories and anxieties which has also been reflected through her internal monologue.

Freud's contributions to understanding the unconscious have long influenced psychoanalytic readings of literature and psychoanalytic criticism. He famously asserted that "the unconscious never forgets" (Freud) and that repressed desires inevitably resurface in distorted forms. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, for instance, the narrator's obsessive fixation on the wallpaper can be seen as the exteriorisation of repressed emotions. As she writes, "I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!" (Gilman, p. 9). This exclamation not only captures her desperate need for self-expression but also signals the beginning of a process in which the repressed, according to Freud, "returns in altered form" (Freud). In this way, her increasingly fragmented language and vision of "a creeping woman" behind the wallpaper become manifestations of an unconscious that is refusing to remain silent. Freud's

ideas are applicable here because they help one understand that the so-called “madness” is not a spontaneous aberration but the result of a systematic repression imposed by a patriarchal authority. His assertion that “what is repressed returns” can reflect the narrator’s gradual identification with the woman she sees in the wallpaper—a symbolic doubling that reflects her inner conflict and the failure of a medical treatment that ignores the irrational side of her nature.

Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freudian theory adds another layer of insight to this interpretation by stressing that language and the symbolic order shape subjectivity. Lacan argued that “the mirror stage is crucial for forming the ego” (Lacan) and that identities are perpetually split between one’s conscious image and their unconscious drives. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood’s experience of seeing herself as if in a distorted mirror—a self she can neither fully claim nor reject—can be interpreted as a Lacanian split. Esther’s description of feeling “trapped under a bell jar” (Plath, p. 148) reflects a state in which her symbolic order has failed to accommodate her true desires. The bell jar, in this way, becomes a metaphor for the “lack in the symbolic” that prevents Esther from achieving a coherent or fixed identity. Lacanian theory is applicable because it reveals how societal structures, which are organized around language and symbolic order, contribute to the fragmentation of the self; Esther’s inner turmoil is not only personal but also a consequence of the way society compels her to identify as “a woman” in a narrow, prescribed manner. Her ricocheting between moments of clarity that hit her from time to time and episodes of despair that completely take her down can be seen as the outcome of a continual confrontation with the “Other” within her own psyche.

Hélène Cixous, in *écriture féminine*, a famous work, contends that “woman must write herself into being” (Cixous, p. 112). This idea is directly relevant to both Gilman and Plath. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator’s secret diary is her only outlet—a form of writing that defies the oppressive ban imposed by her husband. As she confesses, “I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal” (Gilman, p. 2). According to Cixous, acts of writing are not only attempts at documenting oneself, but they are also radical acts of liberation that challenge the dominant symbolic order. In her work *The Laugh Of Medusa*, Cixous charges language with Phallogocentric allegations, it privileges the “phallic” signifier and, in doing so, marginalizes the feminine. Applying this perspective to *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Bell Jar* discloses that the protagonists’ inability to express their inner selves is not merely a result of mental breakdown or personal failing, but rather is closely related to the ways in which their subjectivities have been repressed by a language—and consequently, a culture—that is governed by masculine norms. Thus, the narrator’s disjointed, frequently disorganised prose is not an indication of her a psychotic episode but rather a voice that is refusing to be silenced. Similarly, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther’s internal monologue has been introduced with a sort of desperate creativity—a willingness to express an inconceivable desires and anxieties that the outside world forces her to suppress. Plath’s work is characterized by moments when language itself seems to break apart, in a way reflecting Esther’s internal deterioration and disintegration; for instance, when Esther reflects, “I felt as if the sky were closing in” (Plath, p. 112), her words convey both a physical and symbolic enclosure. Cixous’s theoretical perspective is relevant here because it enables one to see these narrative ruptures as intentional and generative rather than merely a symptom of an illness.

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