



## Analyzing the Theme of Loneliness and Oppression in The Yellow Wallpaper through Feminist Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the concept of feminism in The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a short story that explores the theme of loneliness and oppression of a woman through a feminist perspective. The study is qualitative in nature and uses textual analysis as an approach. The protagonist, a woman, is confined to her room and treated as an invalid by her husband, who is a doctor. She is not allowed to engage in activities that would stimulate her imagination and creativity, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Through the protagonist's experience, Gilman critiques the patriarchal society of her time, where women were denied agency and considered inferior to men. In this story, all these things have been felt by the main character who has miraculous imagination. She found a painting and feel that there is a woman who has been strangled by the painting. She has crawled to get out of that painting but she failed. Indirectly she found herself in that woman who has been imprisoned in the painting. She is the living example of the oppressed creature in the clutches of patriarchal society. The yellow wallpaper in the story symbolizes the limitations imposed on the protagonist and other women of her time, highlighting the patriarchal control and oppression they face. In conclusion, The Yellow Wallpaper portrays the loneliness and isolation of women in a patriarchal society through a feminist lens.

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## 1. Introduction

This study examines "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkin Gilman from a feminist perspective (Gilman, 2011). Feminism is the study of giving equal rights to both genders to treat women equally to men in our society. Feminism is spread worldwide. This theory explores the role of males and females in the society. It argues that women are subordinated, oppressed, suppressed, and even abused by men. Society does not acknowledge them in any field. In domestic Pakistani society, women are restricted to house chores and domestic life. They are not allowed to go outside or go of their free will and do whatever they want to do. While a male is free to participate in anything. Many women are prohibited from owning property, receiving higher education, and taking part in public life. Feminism is of the view that women are just as capable of moral agency and reasoning as men. It asserts that married women have more anxiety and pressure rather than unmarried men and women. The gender division in the public sphere and private sphere must change so that women have equal rights in marriage. Women have long been refused the chance to express and use this reasoning.

It can be seen in "The Yellow Wallpaper" which is the story of a woman who is being suppressed. She wants to do writing and painting but her husband does not allow her. Her husband is a physician. She gives birth to a daughter and after that, she suffers from temporary nervous depression. And because of this, her husband keeps her in isolation and disconnects

her from everyone even from her child. She is not allowed to do anything in any way and is ordered her to stay in a room. He tries to persuade her to live a domestic life. He stops her from writing because he knows that her writings could revolutionize society. These circumstances make her alone. She connects herself with a painting that is in her room and supposes that there is a woman inside the wallpaper who wants to come out but the wallpaper pushes her inside and does not let her leave. In this story, she represents all those women who are bound at home by patriarchal society in every century till now.

## **1.2. Charlotte Perkin Gilman**

Charlotte Perkin Gilman was an American novelist, and philosopher. She was born on 3 July 1860 and committed suicide on 17 August 1935. She started her career by writing poetry, plays, fiction, and non-fiction work such as *Women and Economic, what Diantha Did, forerunner, Benigna, Machivalli, Herland, Something to Vote For, and The Business League for Women, The Home and The Hospital*. She was well-known for the feminist trend during the early 1900s. She was a lecturer and gave lectured about feminism. She took a stand for women's rights and believed that domestic life makes women oppressed. After the publication of *Women and Economics*, she became famous all over the world. It was translated into seven different languages. Her other works have also been translated into many languages around the world.

## **1.3. Research Questions**

- 1.** How the main character in this story has been suppressed in this male dominant society in light of the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper"?
- 2.** How do women struggle hard for their survival in the different sections of society as presented by Gilman in "The Yellow Wallpaper"(Gilman, 2011)?
- 3.** How females have only been stereotyped in every situation of their lives as shown in "The Yellow Wallpaper"?

## **1.4. Significance**

The significance of this study is to inform people about the bad condition of women in the society. To show how women struggle for their identity. To show how they are ignored. They still strive for their rights in this age. Specifically, in the rural areas women are bound in their homes. They are not allowed to get an education and do what they want to do. They are convinced by men that the only job for women is as a mother and as a wife. The dominant society feels that they are inferior. This study makes people realize that help is needed for all those women who are suffering in these circumstances and to give them their due rights. They have equal rights as men in society.

## **2. Literature Review**

A feminist reading of literature is an interpretive lens that examines how gender and power relationships are represented in a literary work. It seeks to uncover how male and female characters are portrayed and how these portrayals reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms and values. A feminist reading also considers the role of the author, as well as the historical and cultural context in which the work was written. This type of reading can reveal how literary works may reflect and reinforce gender-based inequalities, as well as how they may challenge these inequalities and promote gender equality. By exposing patriarchal attitudes and representations, a feminist reading of literature can help to broaden our understanding of gender and its impact on society.

Feminist theory is a multidisciplinary field of study that seeks to understand the nature of gender inequality and to promote gender equality. The following are some of the key features of feminist theory:

- 1. Intersectionality:** Feminist theory recognizes that gender is not the only factor that affects a person's experiences and opportunities. It acknowledges that gender interacts with other identity categories, such as race, class, sexuality, and ability, to shape experiences and identities.
- 2. Patriarchy:** Feminist theory posits that gender inequality is perpetuated and maintained through a system of patriarchy, which is a social and political system that values masculinity and subordinates femininity.

3. Gender as a social construct: Feminist theory views gender as a social construct, rather than a biological fact. This means that gender roles and expectations are shaped by social and cultural factors, rather than biology.
4. Focus on lived experiences: Feminist theory prioritizes the experiences and perspectives of women and other marginalized groups. It seeks to uncover and understand the ways in which gender shapes experiences and identities.
5. Emphasis on agency: Feminist theory recognizes that individuals have the capacity to resist and challenge patriarchal norms and structures. It highlights the importance of agency, or the ability to act, in shaping individual and collective experiences.
6. Interdisciplinary approach: Feminist theory draws on a variety of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, history, literature, and political science, to understand the complex nature of gender and its impact on society.
7. Critique of dominant norms and values: Feminist theory critiques dominant norms and values that perpetuate gender inequality, such as the idea of binary gender roles, the prioritization of masculinity over femininity, and the devaluation of traditionally feminine qualities and activities.

In this study, the researcher has reviewed different research previously done in the present study.

Treichler (1984) examined the problem of discourse differences among men and women. Shumaker (1985) explored why the yellow wallpaper is considered a feminist piece of literature. The assertions made by Johnson (1989) about the narrator's breakdown as the result of decades of suppressed rage (Johnson, 1989). Wagner-Martin (1989) also showed light on women's role in patriarchal societies.

Bak (1994) investigated the concept of imprisoned and surveillance in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Kristeva's vision for the feminism of the next generation (McAfee, 2004), Hysteria concept explored by Freud (Thurschwell, 2000).

Oyebedo (2011) examined the short story *the yellow wallpaper*. The women who experienced the same nervous breakdown the narrator and writer have given a rest cure that was a poor choice under these circumstances.

Lanser (1989) attempted also the feminist criticism approach. Beurden (2013) analysed the yellow wallpaper through feminist touch. This paper holds gothic horror and feminist reading to interpret the story through different elements.

Hood (2017) attempted the Charlotte Perkin Gilman short story the yellow wallpaper from a feminist perspective. He depicted the system of oppression that enfeeble the narrator and lead her to depression and mental illness in a patriarchal society. Ghafoor and Sherko (2018) analysed *The Yellow Wallpaper* from a feminist approach. This research disclosed hidden messages in the text through symbols and showed that late 19th-century work was written for reasons. They explored that Gilman protects the women around her.

Alkan (2021) investigated *The yellow wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkin Gilman from the perspective of liberal feminism. This paper examined how the different domains of patriarchal societies affect gender roles in separate spheres.

Battisti and Fiorato (2012) have focused on the issue of women's identity and how it endured in patriarchal countries under the shadow of their male counterparts.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study discusses how research is carried out and how data is collected. The methodology of the study is descriptive and analytical.

#### **3.1. Research Method**

This research is based on and descriptive method. A qualitative approach has been conducted to analyze the short story, "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" by Charlotte Perkin Gilman. It will explore the different concepts in the light of feminism.

### **3.2. Descriptive Research**

The descriptive approach depends on collecting data from the text of the short story. The researcher describes the text as it is to show, for example, the events of that time and how they were, and how they are in the immediate situation.

### **3.3. Data Process**

This sort of data has been taken from the American writer Charlotte Perkin Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper". This work was published in January 1892. Furthermore, this story will be analyzed in the light of feminism. The following procedures have been taken to understand the short story:

- Read the story many times to understand the deepest meaning of the story.
- Find an easy method to make the reader understand the concept of feminism.
- The findings of this research convey that analyzing the story "The Yellow Wallpaper" gives us a new vision to investigate the hidden ideas and meaning through feminism.
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### **3.4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to inform the readers there are several approaches to reading a text. It will also help the reader to understand the position of women in society through this short story and how women are helpless. It will also provide a different point of view to approach this short story.

## **4. Data Analysis**

This story is about a woman who suffers from temporary nervous depression after her childbirth. She is the narrator of the story and an unnamed woman. Her husband is a physician and his name is Dr. John who gives her complete rest as a way to cure. He keeps her away from everyone in her room. She wants to write and do painting but her husband does not allow her. He brings her to another state. She feels a little uneasy about the state. She goes along with her husband's desire and stays with him. She does not say anything when her husband chooses for her a larger room on the top floor. John's sister Jennie stays with them and looks after their house. They both move to stay in the top floor room with horrible yellow wallpaper which she dislikes. She tells her husband that she doesn't want to stay in that room because of the horrible wallpaper and wants to shift downstairs but he refuses. She becomes more and more fascinated with the wallpaper, the longer she remains in the room. After a family get-together on the 4th of July, she describes her sickness and shows how difficult it is to do daily tasks. But her husband advises her to take more rest. She keeps her work secret from her husband because he does not allow her. When she is fascinated by the wallpaper she feels that there is a woman behind the wallpaper and she comes out in the night from the wallpaper and crawls around in the room. She wants to help her and therefore, she awakens the whole night and sleeps all day. Before leaving the state, one-day John spends all night in the town because of some serious cases. She makes Jennie leave the room saying she wants to sleep alone in the room. She then looks at the wallpaper and supposes that a woman will come out from the wallpaper. When John comes back, he tries his best to get inside and finally he does. He discovers her on the ground, crawling. She asserts that the women of wallpaper finally came out. In the end, John eventually faints. She becomes shocked to see him.

### **4.1. Analysis of the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper***

The feminist approach is prominent in this short story. It was published on January 1892. In this period, women were regarded as inferior, weaker, and had no right to vote. They had been powerless and voiceless and always subservient in their marriages and they used to do whatever their husbands asked to do without protest. Gilman showed all these points in the story.

*"John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him".*

These lines show the men's carelessness towards women. John does not care about her trouble he thinks that she is fine and has nothing to worry about. Our society focuses on fulfilling materialistic needs and neglects emotional needs, which leave our women feeling emotionally drained or uncared for. Men think that if they give money to women, give them nice clothes, if

they have nice furniture in their house and serve good food to their guests, then they think that they are doing everything right. They don't realize that there are many other things in human life apart from material things. In our society, men are emotionally unavailable to women, whether it is their mother, sister, wife, or daughter, men do not care about the emotional needs of women. Some men don't do this act knowingly, but naturally, it doesn't come into their minds that women may also need their love or care. The love, care, and attention which women deserve, men do not provide them. Because of this, women become stressed and they think that they have made a mistake, that everything is going wrong. Due to this, they are neither happy nor satisfied with their life. The spiritual needs are not fulfilled and by fulfilling the physical needs, men think that their duty is fulfilled. Men think that if nothing seems to be wrong and there's no need to fight, which eventually is taken to mean that everything is fine.

*I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.*

*"Why, darling!" said he, "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how to leave before."*

These lines show that women cannot talk with their husbands whenever and whatever they want. Before the talk, they look at their husband's mood whether they are in good mood or not. They want to talk about that what they want to say. Men do not give them their right position in life as life partners. Men always make women feel that they are dominant to them. If men do not want to talk and do not do what women want. Then women will not say anything to them and always obey to husbands' orders. Even if they suffer in this environment. Men don't prioritize women's opinions and thoughts over theirs, so a woman can share their thoughts only when their husband allows them. Here, the narrator looks at the situation before speaking and her husband is only embodiment of female suppression and male dominance.

*"I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wall-paper - he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away".*

This line depicts how society makes women helpless. The dominant society has kept women so suppressed that they cannot express their happiness to anyone or their loved ones. The narrator does not tell the reasons behind her happiness or recovery and she thinks that her husband does not understand her and might mock her. Her biggest fear is that her husband will take her back when he knows the reason for her recovery and she does not want to go anywhere before completing her work. Here shows society's helplessness toward women. They are not allowed to do what they want to do. Women don't need many things for a comfortable life from men, but the things which they expect from them, are not provided by men and women become unable to express what they really want. Most of the time men do not force them to be quiet, but sometimes women themselves are silent, they are afraid of what will people say if they speak. The fear and hesitation are put in women's minds from childhood and later they become permanent through their husbands. Men never accept women's will and never permit them what they want.

*"There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word.... We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day".*

Here, these lines show how the narrator is being prevented from writing due to her husband because he doesn't like that. He knows that she likes to write but he stops her. Because somehow he realizes that she is unique and her writing might bring revolution to society. Here, can be seen the dominancy of men's society. Men don't go with women's ability in the public sphere. He was afraid that he would be overshadowed. He thinks that if people know that his wife is more talented than him he might lose his value in society. Often, men do not have the ability that their women have, so they do not allow them to advance. For example, a woman who wants to become a businesswoman, or go to other fields like singing, designing etc., men do not support them because they cannot even see a woman getting ahead of themselves. Society suppresses the voice of women. According to the dominant society, women have no capability as men have. They think that women have only one job that is inside the private sphere as mothers and as a wife.

"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?"

Here he clarifies to their relatives and friends that her wife is not sick, she is fine and nervous depression is not a big thing that she has. After that, he did not allow her to do anything he keeps her in isolation in a room and even keeps away her from her child. He also makes her feel that she is a patient. In every situation in every step indirectly he makes sure she knows that she is sick. She is unable to do anything, meet with anyone, to take care of her child. He believes her to be weaker. Here, it is shown that men will never compromise with their reputation, and to gain respect in others' eyes they can do anything.

All points which are discussed above, show the suffering of women in the society. Society takes away from their pleasure, they are not allowed to have a voice, and to write, or do anything which gives them satisfaction. In our society, in rural areas, women are still suppressed. They struggle for basic needs. Men control women's life. They have no power over their own lives. From childhood, girls are told that a daughter is only for marriage and to maintain the respect of the parents in society. Therefore, most women do not know that they should take a stand for their rights. Men are still superior. Society does not give rights to women in the education field, fashion design, media and journalism, law, information technology, social work etc. Women are taught that they are inferior and they shouldn't stand up to men. These things lead them to psychological loneliness everywhere. Maybe they have been provided with the basic needs which are sufficient to live a good life, but inside they feel lonely as society believes them inferior and weaker. Society robs them of spiritual joy and keeps women confined in the house. These things make them alone in society.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reveals the female condition in society, their struggles, their loneliness, and their suppression of voice and personality, etc. Gilman shows her life experiences in this story. "The Yellow Wallpaper" gives her the best way to explore the dark side of society toward females. The narrator is one of those women who is bound to the private sphere and stops writing, and to other things which give her satisfaction. Society gives women only one job as a mother and as a wife. The narrator shows that when women are neglected by society and suppressed by their husbands for whatever they want to do then they live their life without happiness. Society convinces them to find happiness in their husbands and children. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is known as the best work of the 19th century. Gilman aims to disclose the faces of patriarchal society and also give the path to women to take a stand for themselves and do what they desire to do without any hesitation, stand with confidence, and prove to the world that they are as capable as men. From a feminist perspective, the protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman experiences profound loneliness and isolation as a result of the patriarchal societal norms and expectations of the time. The narrator is confined to her bedroom, and is not allowed to engage in creative pursuits or seek fulfillment outside of the traditional roles of wife and mother. This restriction leads to a decline in her mental health and a feeling of entrapment in her own life. The story is often interpreted as a critique of the male-dominated medical establishment and the societal belief that women were inherently inferior and needed to be controlled. The narrator's struggle against the limitations imposed on her serves as a symbol of the larger fight for women's autonomy and self-expression in a society that sought to limit their freedom and choices.

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