



UNDERSTANDING JUDITH BUTLER'S CONCEPT OF 'GENDER PERFORMATIVITY' IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S *THE YELLOW WALL-PAPER*: A POSTSTRUCTURALIST APPROACH

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Abstract:

The Yellow Wall-Paper can largely be situated under a feminist text but each aspect needs to get an equal attention. For instance, if we see it through the lens of poststructural feminism, we come across Butler's notion of 'gender performativity' getting highlighted in the text. Judith Butler is considered to be a poststructural feminist who has conceived the idea of gender as performance. And, this poststructuralist approach of 'gender performativity' is basically to deconstruct the gender binary and to subvert the traditional doctrines being imposed on both male and female. The purpose is to disrupt the existing notion of gender identity and to challenge the hierarchical set up where a woman is constantly being restricted to follow her desires.

Key Words:

Gender Performativity, Poststructural feminism, Poststructuralism, Gender binary, Patriarchy, Women's writing, Ecriture feminine

Introduction:

Poststructural feminism is simply a branch of feminism taking its insights from post-structuralism. Just like a post-structuralist thought, poststructural feminism intends to break the fixity of categories asserting that the idea of 'universal' is problematic. They put emphasis on the differences and try to address any issue that a woman goes through, be it her psychic condition, her mental illness or her flaws that she carries. Some important poststructural feminists include Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and Judith Butler. Poststructural feminism comes up with the concept of 'gender' to prove that how society is constructed in a gendered way. The idea is to deconstruct the dominant discourses and to break male supremacy over it. One such theorist is Judith Butler. She introduces 'Gender Performativity' which is a theory given by her in *Gender Trouble* and is expanded upon in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Feminist Epistemology". According to Butler, the very idea of gender is an act, or performance. This act is the way a person walks, talks, dresses, and behaves and this could be called as 'gender performativity'. What society regards as a person's gender is just a performance made to please social expectations and a true expression of that particular person's identity. As mentioned earlier, the study would specifically focus on how this concept gets highlighted in Gilman's *The Yellow Wall-Paper* and it will adopt Butler's theoretical framework. Having a poststructuralist viewpoint, Judith Butler projects the re-positioning of gender based on his or her experience. In a society made up of patriarchal dominance, the order of meaning solely revolts upon patriarchy, thereby excluding a woman's experience. For a woman, what concerns the most is the ability to express her true self rather than her physical appearance.

A brief analysis of the story is that there is a woman who is undergoing a treatment called 'rest cure' prescribed by her doctor where she is asked to isolate herself in a room away from the real world. The story is actually based on Gilman's own experience after the birth of her daughter. She suffered from postpartum depression where her doctor Silas Weir Mitchell prescribed her for the 'rest cure' which eventually had worsened her depression. Her own experience later inspired her to write *The Yellow Wallpaper*. She mentions about this in her essay "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper" (1913). She says how this stereotypical manly figure in the name of a doctor asked her to live a domestic life without touching pen, brush or pencil. Going against the 'rest cure', she even sent a copy of *The Yellow Wallpaper* but he never acknowledged it. In the story, we have seen John isolating his wife in the attic of a country home and even restricting her to write her emotions. But, the woman/the protagonist probably named as Jane secretly writes her experiences and presence to the reader as a diary in first person. This can be related with the ideas given by Helen Cixous that women's bodies and their writings are closely associated. Cixous uses a term called 'écriture feminine' to explain this in her essay "The laugh of the Medusa". According to Cixous, it is through feminine writing that one can inscribe their unconscious awareness. It is also noteworthy to mention that other than these critics, there were many writers who were already talking about this. We have Virginia Woolf who developed a style of writing that would free the woman from the oppression of male dominance. Her major works like *Mrs. Dalloway* is a great example to it. Coming back to Gilman's story, the male figures like her husband and her brother

are both shown as physicians and holding high positions in society. But just as an ordinary woman in nineteenth century, Jane is incapable of doing anything other than to follow what her husband wants:

So I take phosphates or phosphites – whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and I am absolutely forbidden to work until I am well again. (648)

Throughout the story what Gilman tries to critique is the role imposed on women in the nineteenth century. During that time, men were considered more intelligent than women and could go further in education, whilst for women it would do damage to their health if they spend long hour studying. If a woman tried to cultivate her intellect beyond the drawing room accomplishments, she was considered violating the order of nature. This can be seen in Gilman's text as well where Jane stays alert all the time: "There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word." (649)

The most important aspect that Gilman tries to challenge is the 'rest cure' therapy – a routine of treatment prescribed to women which excludes them from their normal environment. We see John both as a controlling doctor and a controlling husband who constantly asks her not to give wings to her imagination and not to pour out her inner feelings by writing. She is rather asked to stay in her bedroom and get a proper sleep. As her words reveal her own disliking of having been confined in a room:

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old – fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it. (648)

Her suppressed emotions ultimately backfired her with mental instability and innumerable imaginations. She is even unable to get along with her own child. Also, there are certain instances where Jane sarcastically points out her inner turmoil as her husband fails to understand her. She says:

John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious. I am glad my case is not serious! But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing. John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him. (649)

What leads to her mental breakdown is not exactly John's lack of understanding her condition, it is rather the inability of Jane expressing her self. Her lack of 'self – expression' is what leads to her inner turmoil. She is made to stay normal, to sleep normal and to talk normal. Just as Butler argues about how society regards a person's gender to be just a performance to meet social expectations rather than to express one's true self. Basically, Butler's idea is to bring forth the emergence of 'performing gender', to subvert the traditional gender roles and to discuss it in larger context. This fits well with Gilman when she tries to address the psychic issues that a woman goes through post-delivery or it can be due to any reason. We have seen Jane's multiple attempts to free the woman trapped in the wallpaper which is symbolic to her own confinement in a room. There is lack of 'true self' when we talk about Jane and this is solely because her doctor husband does not allow her to speak her mind or about her imaginations. This leads to her detachment from her inner self and what stays with her is only her constructed performance. She does not see herself as object but as a subject of her own story. There are times too when Jane tries to bring forth her sufferings but John denies to listen, making her feel that everything is normal:

There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so? (652)

Conclusion:

Deconstructing the existing idea of 'gender binary', we see Gilman uplifting her heroine. There is a gender growth after a prolonged confinement. Being ordinary and normal did not help her find peace but rather a victim of subjugation. Incapable of jotting down her emotions in her diary, she soon starts to place her experiences and connects them with the yellow wallpaper of the room in which she is confined. She finds her 'inner self' in that wallpaper and begins to feel free as she utters: "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be" (653). In Butler's words, we can call it as the emergence of 'performing gender'. She is breaking through the patriarchal bounds set upon her. It is as liberating and as powerful when her last words read:

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! (656)

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