



A Psychosocial Perspective on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall Paper"

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Abstract: This paper scrutinizes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's protagonist's mental breakdown in "The Yellow Wallpaper". It tries to checklist some of the reasons and causes of psychosis. A general tendency has been to keep silent on mental illness due to the stigma associated with it. People are in denial of mental issues until it explodes a life or many associated lives turn chaotic. The focal point of this analysis is societal and behavioral concerns that lead to psychological disorders. "The Yellow Wall Paper" is an outcome of Gilman's struggle with a nervous disorder, a depression for which she was treated by a physician named S Weir Mitchell.

Keywords: Psychosocial health, mental well being

"The Yellow Wall paper" was quite a steer when it was published in the year 1892. Gilman herself talks about the reactions she received from some of the medical fraternity. The short story, based on her personal experience of a stern and unremitting nervous breakdown presents the casual approach towards mental illness, and specifically if related to women the advice would be to "live as domestic a life as far as possible, to have but two hours intellectual life a day, and never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again." (americanyawp.com) This short story has been well discussed from the prisms of feminism and eudaimonia.

Mental health is attaining significance and has been in focus in our country since the pandemic Covid19 when people were confined to the four walls of their houses and faced issues related to health, finance, emotions, etc. The core of emotional breakdown is fear, death, and societal isolation. This paper attempts to analyze the psychosocial perspective in the short story, "The Yellow Wall paper".

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as "A state of well being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her or his community."

Psychosocial health comprises four major components which include mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health. The protagonist of the story is a woman, the only character whose name has no mention. Name is the first zone of an individual's identity and belongingness. The protagonist is deprived of the very basic psychosocial need of selfhood and affinity.

The narrator and her husband move to a fine-looking estate for the summer to help the narrator overcome her illness which is explained by her as nervous depression following the birth of their baby which today is clinically defined as postpartum depression. John's sister, Jennie, also lives with them as their housekeeper. The narrator is guilty – conscious of her role as a mother which she is not yet prepared to dawn – "It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous." (Gilman, 11) Multiple factors, including hormones, biology, psychology, family dynamics, social environment, and culture, have been found to contribute to the development of postpartum depression, according to researchers. The major responsibility for a child's care and nurture rests with the mother. The narrator, who may have aspirations beyond household responsibilities, is unable to cope with the expectations of others of her as a mother. She may not be ready for the adjustments and adaptations that the situation of child-birth (setting of the society) demands from her.

The narrator of the story attributes her slow recovery to the fact that her husband, John, a physician, does not think she is ill. The very notion that 'nervous depression' and 'hysterical tendency' does not necessitate medical attention strengthens the idea that diseases are cured purely by pills. The narrator is 'forbidden to work' until she is well again is something that she disagrees with. The patient with mental illness is either not taken seriously or branded a lunatic. Her or his views are dismissed.

The narrator says that she reticently writes in resistance to her family's insistence not to. Writing seems the only mode of expression for the narrator where she conveys herself without being judged or being countered by preconceived notions. Unexpressed emotions never die, according to Freud. They are buried alive and subsequently resurface in more hideous ways. Denial of expression is the initiation of an individual's downward spiral journey.

Anger is a merchandise of grief. The narrator says that she has been irrationally losing her temper with John. She finds herself too susceptible but John comprehends this behavior as a lack of self-control which in turn prompts the narrator to exercise self-restraint. She does not even have her right of choice. It is John who decides which room she is supposed to have. He also asserts that they are in that house for her. He even takes care of her prescription. The endearing words used by John exhibit his love and the narrator too seems to believe in his love. In the garb of love and care generally, the game of control is played out which John does perfectly as the narrator confesses she feels ungrateful for not valuing the care and concern of John. This imposed ungratefulness does affect the psyche of an individual, the way it does with the narrator.

The narrator says that John does not know how much she suffers because he believes there is 'no reason to suffer' (Gilman, 10). This is another aspect of psychic issues where the onlookers or the family feels the patient has everything in life and hence no reason to have a nervous breakdown. The narrator is cut off from all sorts of companionship. Her husband and sister-in-law do not look at her as someone who needs to be heard. She is ignored, unheard, and deprived of basic venting and confiding. Many times the need is for emotional support and mental calmness, the lack of which devalues materialistic possessions and comforts from them.

John decides not to repaper the room. The narrator drops her demand for a change of room by saying, "It is an airy and comfortable room as anyone needs, wish and of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim." (Gilman, 12) The narrator in her effort to please John, the way she has been culturally trained, suppresses her self – need that too when she is so well aware of the impact of the wall paper on her mind. The very fact that the room appears to be a nursery with barred windows could be interpreted as her regression into a safer phase of life or as her unconscious nervous awareness of her impending motherhood duties and responsibilities and in both these situations, it was she who needed assistance but was involved in gratifying others.

An unconscious comparison hangs on in the mind of the narrator with Jennie who is the ideal woman who confines to the societal norms and becomes a role model to be followed. Anyone not meeting the standards and wanting to have a life of her own has to enter a battle of survival and will naturally turn hysterical in battle mode.

The narrator's obvious symptoms of depression go unnoticed by her family, "I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time." (Gilman, 21) John does not allow her to meet her cousins as he feels her crying has weakened her argument for it. Later too, the narrator's request to leave that house is denied by John under the pretext that she is getting well, and her appetite has improved. When she says her appetite is better in the evening when he is with her not in his absence, he dismisses her with his statement, "She shall be as sick as she pleases!" (Gilman, 31) This shows John's trivial attitude toward her illness despite asking her to get well for his, their child, and her own sake. May be due to restrictions imposed on the narrator in the name of treatment, her condition starts deteriorating as she starts hallucinating, "I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors..." (Gilman, 44) On being cautioned by John she tries to check her 'imaginative power and habit of story making'. (Gilman, 13) Being alone and having no one to comprehend her feelings she slowly starts engaging with the wall paper.

Her engagement with the wall paper proves fatal to her weak mental health. We can see her having delusions and being paranoid. She sees women trapped behind the wall paper. She also believes that John and Jennie too are affected by the wall paper. She expresses her pleasure that their child does not have to stay in that house. She says,

“The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.” (Gilman, 35-36) Her hallucinations and paranoia turn schizophrenic by the end when she tears off the wall paper and creeps on the floor. Seeing the disgusting sight John faints and the narrator creeps over him.

Experiences and sensations that are not perceptible to other people are referred to as hallucinations. The narrator quite plainly has olfactory and visual hallucinations. Her description of the wallpaper makes this clear. In addition to claiming to see ladies crawling outdoors, she claims to see them stuck behind the wallpaper. She says, “I don't like to look out of the windows even there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.” (Gilman, 52). She refers to the wallpaper's odour as having a “yellow smell” that persists in her memory. The defining signs of schizophrenia are thought to be hallucinations and delusions. The narrator finally conveys the idea that she has lost her sense of reality when she is shown creeping on the floor.

The wall paper plays an important role in the narrator's psychological decline. The yellow wall paper is symbolic of the oppressive societal norms that take away individual freedom. The yellow wall paper is described as, “On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law that is a constant irritant to a normal mind. The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.” (Gilman, 33) The yellow wall paper seems to be the accepted convention in a society which if not followed by an individual will be termed ‘crazy’ just like Paulo Coelho says in his novel “Veronica Decides to Die” but Gilman seems more concerned about the exemplars set for the women in a patriarchal society. And these exemplars or standards are set for women just in the way she describes the omnipresent ‘yellow smell’ of the wall paper, “It is not bad – at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.” (Gilman, 40) Slowly the gentleness turns into a beautiful cage where worldly concerns are met but soul dies of suffocation.

Human beings with their peerless capacity to think have complicated the simple laws of living a harmonious life. A society brought in a system of living ended up in a power game of dominance which led to various discriminatory practices and suppression of the instincts which thereof have induced mental, emotional and social degeneration of humans especially women who became victims of a controlled gender role. Remedies are known but the set societal pattern seems too hard to execute the simple remedies. The narrator in “The Yellow Wall Paper” herself is aware of her cure when she says she believes affable work, with stimulation and change, would do her good. She wished for ‘less opposition, more society and stimulus.’ (Gilman, 3-4) The treatment administered to her focused on her physiological well being rather than addressing any underlying emotional concerns. The idea of ‘human touch’ holds a fundamental significance for human well being, encompassing a range of factors from medical treatments to the behavior of individuals in general.

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