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Challenging the domination of medical Gaze: A critical probing into charlotte Perkins Gilman's the yellow wallpaper

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Abstract

The study aims to look at Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" to critically probe into the practice of confining diseased body in the name of care and cure. In the process the space of the clinic plays an active role to identify, categorize and marginalize such bodies thereby denying autonomy. Using Foucault's idea of "docile body" and how the institution of medicine also actively participates to create such bodies, the paper critically examines the plight of a woman suffering from post-partum depression and also tries to read the politics behind incarcerating her body.

Keywords: Docile body, medical gaze, rest cure

Introduction

"And there is a charge, a very large charge/For a word or a touch/Or a bit of blood/Or a piece of hair or on my clothes./So, so, Herr Doctor./So, Herr Enemy." This was the speaking persona in Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus" who experiences a forced resurrection and therefore, her failed suicide attempt falls upon her as a curse. As she unravels her agony which sprouts from several causes, a reader can also sense her disgust towards the physician's gaze which often ignores her thinking mind and reduces her as an assemblage of bone and skin to be closely scrutinized under "medical gaze". Taking this idea of how a woman's body is denied autonomy by the space of the clinic as its key pointer, the paper aims to read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" which was first published in January 1892 in *The New England Magazine*. Written as a series of journal entries by the woman narrator, who is suffering from postnatal depression and confined within a room by her physician husband in the name of rest cure, the story probes into her deeper mental terrain as she desperately seeks to question a system, which suffocates her every moment in the name of cure. Using Foucault's argument that identifies medical gaze as an instrument to discipline/contain/objectify a patient's body as its primary tool of analysis, the present study aims to read "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a text which identifies the space of the clinic as oppressive in its coercive attempts to subjugate a woman's body and curb its independent agency.

On Gilman and the Story behind "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892)

"The Yellow Wallpaper" has been interpreted by many as a semi-autobiographical narrative which was conceived by Gilman in response to Dr. Silas Mitchell's regime of rest cure imposed upon her after the birth of her first daughter. To cure her postnatal depression, Mitchell prescribed a very strict control on her body and mind which led to a forced incarceration and complete prohibition on physical and well as mental/creative activities. In fact, much later, Sigmund Freud also experimented with his psychoanalytic method to offer it as possible cure for hysteria and consequently, challenged Mitchell's heavily recommended rest cure. From Pamela Thurschwell's account, one gets a brief idea about the ruthlessness that rest cure involves:

In 1873, the American physician Silas Weir Mitchell developed his 'rest cure' for the treatment of neurasthenia, a slightly less violent version of hysteria. Mitchell's rest cure depended upon isolation from family and friends, immobility, no intellectual stimulation of any kind, and an over-inflated diet in which the patient was expected to gain as much as 50 pounds. (19)

Instead of such regimentation, Freud preferred to listen to the patient's stories and sought to devise an alternative method to treat women with mental instability. Gilman's own

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experience with Mitchell's rest cure also led her to question such normalized medical practices with her critical intervention into the prevalent medical discourses. Thus the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" happened where Gilman allows the suffering woman to speak. The entire story is narrated in the form of her journal entries through which the author imperceptibly raises several perturbing questions: Is the woman mentally unstable or hysteric? Is she a victim of patriarchal society that often uses medical institution as its tool? If so, then who is ill? Is it the woman or the system which chooses to choke her voice?

Rest cure and the Construction of Docile body in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Any kind of institution, be it medical or military, seeks to construct "docile bodies" which would readily be subservient, and never question/critique the fallacies embedded within the instruments of power. Using Foucauldian perspective, it can be understood that discipline is deliberately imposed upon people to curb their autonomy and ruin all ability to defy authoritarian control:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down. A "political autonomy", which was also a "mechanics of power", was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, "docile" bodies. In short, it dissociates power from the body. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 138)

As the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" relates her experience, we can easily sense how her physician husband John becomes a tool of patriarchal oppression who exploits his skill as a medical practitioner to create a "docile body" out of her. In her journal she confides: "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction. I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more" (Gilman 648). It is significant to note here that she grows a sense of aversion towards her husband and his care regime which does not permit her to indulge into any creative activities. Hence, the moment she could sense her husband's approaching steps, she abruptly stops her writing: "There comes John, and I must put this away, - he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman 649). She wants to identify that there is a problem but her husband is not ready to acknowledge it. Much later, the feminist thinker, Betty Friedan in her work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), would identify severe depression mostly in upper and upper middle class housewives in 1950's America who were not ready to admit their discontentment with day-to-day monotony while desperately trying to play the roles of successful wives and mothers. While referring to these malcontent housewives, Friedan talks about their "problem with no name":

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night-she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-"Is this all?" (44)

The post natal depression of the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" too, springs from her monotonous confinement within a restricted space where she is not even allowed to

imagine or express herself. As readers, we can sense how gradually she develops an aversion towards John and his constant monitoring of her activities:

John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try. (Gilman 649)

But at the same time, she also admits that it takes much effort as she tries to follow John's instructions which often seek to limit her spontaneity and thereby, producing a mere automaton out of her. She becomes weary of her own life.

Questioning John's Medical Gaze

John's repeated insistence on law and order leads the protagonist to seek refuge in the abstract designs of the yellow wallpaper. Initially she admits how the yellow colour was acting as a repellent for her. But, with passage of time she not only normalises the presence of the wallpaper but also begins to identify herself with the inanimate entity. She finds the wallpaper as an extension of her husband's watchful eyes, constantly supervising her activities. The wallpaper liberates her, and it also captivates her. In her interpretation, it is a weird mix of liberty and bondage. As a keen observer intent on deciphering some meaning out of the abstract patterns, she makes an interesting discovery. At daytime, "there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind" (Gilman 653). But at night, the same pattern changes as the light fades out: "In twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars!" (Gilman 653). This working of her mind that perpetually seeks to look at the wallpaper as a living entity often acting as a mirror and quite often curbing her autonomy may apparently appear strange. But the way she repeatedly indulges into fantasy despite John's vehement dislike of the same, clearly manifests her act of resistance. With her relentless acts of imagination, she continues to challenge John's patterned thought process. In fact, John's constant medical surveillance, his stubborn dictates to her imposing heavy restrictions on her physical movements as well as creative outputs lead one to pose a pertinent question: Whose illness is being talked about in "The Yellow Wallpaper"? If the woman's obsession with the wallpaper points out her deranged state of mind and tends to keep her in margins, her husband is equally suffering due to his blind submission to a faulty system which objectifies an ailing body and normalizes all acts of medical monitoring that choose to perpetrate acts of violence in the name of rest cure.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be argued that Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" critically engages itself with the nineteenth century medical practices which sought to incarcerate a woman's body in the name of rest cure. Through the protagonist's forced confinement, Gilman weaves her scathing attack against the power which defines medical institution as well. Under the promise of healing and care, medical gaze, too, functions like any other coercive forces in a patriarchal society that reduces a woman's body into a mere object of scrutiny, bereft of its agency and voice. The protagonist's ultimate deviation from what is conventionally accepted as 'normal' registers her resistance against this veiled practice of oppression. Thus,

“The Yellow Wallpaper” divulges the tension between individual autonomy and institutional tyranny, compelling us to reconsider the ideas of cure and care giving, that always frame our perception of medical institution.

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