

Silence in Marriage: A qualitative study of Postpartum Depression in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'

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Abstract

The purpose of the following study is to recognize and address postpartum depression and its effect on women psyche. To analyze the postpartum depression, the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman has been considered. Gillman's protagonist highlights various traumas of a mother and its impact in the relationship with other people and society. In this study, relational lens has been applied to the grounded theory of postpartum depression which approves that the human relations fail not because of misfortune or misunderstanding of words but due to their silence in relation. There are mainly two primary aims of this study, taken from 'The Yellow Wallpaper.' The first aim seeks to explain the importance of acceptance as perceived by the female protagonist. Secondly, the paper seeks to explain the women psyche as a result of silence and loneliness in marriage. It is evident that one cannot deny or ignore the mental traumas after or during pregnancy. Family members try to comfort the mother by providing various material facilities but unconsciously push her to postpartum depression. From a feminist's point of view, replacing loneliness with material comforts as a system is essentially evil. Infected woman needs to be listened and loved as she goes through various hormonal and mental transformations.

The story reveals that the protagonist fails to live up to the standards of 'good mother' and, women have shared the experiences that these negative feelings could neither be spoken nor understood by other members in the family. Women not only survive depression but also become guilty of being useless in relationship. Conclusions emphasize the need of therapy through communication that address their identity crisis and value their importance in family.

Key words: Postpartum depression, double consciousness, identity crisis

The story of "the Yellow Wallpaper" starts with a physician husband John and his unnamed wife, who is the narrator of the story. A disturbed and obedient housewife is taken to a summer home to give her rest and cure her from undisclosed illness. As time passes, she is found to slip into insanity, being locked in a room for days and week.

The paper attempts to analyse the reasons of insanity of the narrator. Gilman has portrayed stereotypical male and female characters in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), which is one of the pioneering feminist works of American Literature. Gilman's unnamed female protagonist in the short story, helps the readers, especially female readers to connect and identify themselves with her. The pioneer of second wave feminist movement, Betty Friedan, in her celebrated work "The Feminine Mystique" (1974) criticizes that woman in a patriarchal society is nothing but the product of the society. They are imagined and developed in a certain fashion so that they fit into the male dominated world. Gilman's male and female characters in the story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' truly represent the society of nineteenth century. The male characters are logical, analytical, and rational in the story, as opposed to the illogical, subjective, and irrational female characters. As per the norms of patriarchal society, the narrator's husband proves his responsibility by giving material comfort ignoring the mental comfort. He diagnoses the physical symptoms but unable to identify the narrator's imagination, her feelings, and traumas. The author has aptly used the yellow wallpaper representing the bars of prison. The narrator's room from the husband's point of view is well equipped room with all amenities and luxury one could think of, but the narrator feels it as a prison. Female imagination versus male reality is found in the story. In this paper, women's postpartum depression is addressed. The study also realizes the need to educate men to empathy their counterparts and help them to cope up with it. There are many examples in the text that shows the contrast between narrator's imagination and her husband's belief. Firstly, when she asks to change the wallpaper because of its ugly pattern. He answers: "*nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way for such fancies*" (Gilman & Dock, 1998, p:31) Secondly, when she asks to change the room because of the wallpaper, but her practical and rational husband refuses to do so by saying, "*You are gaining flesh and colour, your appetite is better, I feel really better about you*" (p 36), here again he notices her physical wellbeing but fails to pay attention to her emotional needs.

Gilman has given the traditional gender roles to her characters as was prevailing in the nineteenth century. The traditional gender roles give men more power, dominance, rational opposed to illogical, powerless, and irrational women just like the narrator and her husband John. When the narrator asks to change the wallpaper, John rejects without giving it a thought by saying that after wallpaper, he might have to change the 'heavy bedstead' and then the 'barred window' and many more things just because he has an imaginative wife. It reflects the dominating male perception about women which he justifies by such words making the narrator succumbed into her shell and accepting loneliness. The tragic truth pointed by Gilman is that not only men but also the other women characters in the story share the same destructive ideas as males. The narrator describes her sister-in-law as 'so good

with the baby'(p31) and 'perfect and enthusiastic housewife and hopes for no better profession' (p 33). The patriarchal society accepts and appreciates her sister-in-law because she is happy and satisfied housewife, that is the role which society gives to a woman. In contrast to the narrators imaginative and writing power, the narrator is believed to be unusual, and the reason given to her erotic behaviour is her passion to write. For example, as mentioned in the story that John has banned his wife to write as he believes that it is the cause of her problems because she has imaginative powers to make story and thus, she applies it to her life. The narrator says, 'There comes John, and I must put this away, he hates me to write a word' (p31)

The trouble of 'male gaze' can be sensed throughout the story. The idea of eyes all around the room is suggestive of the concept of male gaze and harassment. Michel Foucault's concept of Panopticon, in his work "Discipline and Punishment" (1977) where he suggests that factories, prisons, and schools are built in such a fashion that they make possible visibility from outside. It makes the people inside feel always being watched hence they need to be disciplined. The narrator's window in the story also suggest that she is under constant watch. She unconsciously plays the role of the oppressor followed by becoming a meagre prisoner in the room. At the end, she accepts the wallpaper as she becomes tired of resisting it. The narrator points out the common plight of women in the society who must accept and adjust with the norms of society. As in Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the house," which refers to a dutiful, obedient and virtues of an ideal woman. If a woman does not fit to these criteria, then she would be treated as sick or witch. The Victorian era has witnessed many witch trials too. The narrator in the story is treated as sick by her husband and others, as she does not fit in so called 'Angel' formula. The narrator becomes vulnerable due to constant opposition from her husband and other people. All her ideas and suggestions get rejected making her more depressed and lonelier. At the end, she stops complaining and starts accepting her fate gradually descending into psychosis. The narrator is seen crawling at the end and John faints seeing this. We sometimes feel sorry even for John, who is not insensitive but is unable to understand the stress of his wife and somehow may be held responsible for her depression. The author has not given any solution and left the readers to understand and conclude it.

Gilman has raised the problem of postpartum depression in women and tried to educate the male members of the society about it. The causes of depression that can be understood through the story is loneliness, identity crisis, lack of communication, and ignoring the partner in a relationship. A woman undergoes more hormonal changes than men, she needs to be given due respect and importance in household as well as in workplace. The postpartum depression affects the mother, child, and other members around them. It has vast impact on the development of child too. The study through the story is also to make women aware of this depression so that they can accept it and try to find solution and educate men to acknowledge and help their wives to cope up and come out healthy.

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