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**Language, Style and Ideology: A Feminist Stylistic Perspective
on Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper**



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Abstract

The present research intends to explore “The Yellow Wallpaper” through the lens of feminist stylistics to know how through language, Charlotte Perkins Gilman has attempted to reinforce or challenge the typical existing stereotypes that exist in different societies of the world. The study analyzes the data from the perspective of Mills’ (1995) model of Feminist stylistics, through the use of qualitative method to the short story ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’. The present research attempts to identify how Gilman’s use of language and word choice have implied feminist themes in her short story. The story is a critique on the gender norms and medical practices related to female gender in 19th century. The short story itself has been used as a primary data through which the researchers have conducted a close reading of the data, which revealed the impact of social limitation on women’s mental health and autonomy in patriarchal societies. It contends that most often female voices are silenced because of Man-made norms.

Introduction

“The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman was published in 1892, it is a short story that explores the mental health of 19th century women and the oppressive treatment that took toll on their mental health. The narrator of the story is unnamed, all we know about this anonymous narrator is that she just gave birth but she is suffering from some mental illness. Instead of a proper treatment for her mental illness, her husband suggests moving to another house, her husband who is named John, confines her in a room in the name of treating her. This results in her becoming obsessed with the wallpaper in that room, which is yellow, due to this obsession, she slowly goes into a psychosis which symbolizes the long-lasting effects on women which stems from societal norms and patriarchal control. How the story tells us about the struggles women go through for their agency and how patriarchal control adds to this struggle due to which we can say that this story is a feminist literature. Gilman shows us through the main character's mental state, how these patriarchal structures have an effect on women, not only physically but also mentally.

Feminist stylistics is a branch of stylistics analysis that shows the existing gender ideologies being challenged or reinforced by the language used in literature. Feminist stylistics comes across as an interesting branch of stylistics which addresses the questions of gender within texts in relation to how they are done or how they are treated in the process of representation. Feminist approaches are applied in the study of all language properties narrative, power, framing, fragmentation and their meanings in regard to culture and society in order to understand the concepts of gender. Through analyzing text and subtext representation of feminine characters and masculine characters in cultures, gender roles normalized linguistically in society, and patterns of power dynamics embedded in the content and structure of texts, feminist stylistics aim to expose both implicit and explicit prejudice.

The aim of this analysis is to show how language can be used for either rejecting or accepting the prejudice based on gender. This can be shown by seeing the portrayal of female characters as weak and nurturing while portraying the male characters as smart and strong. In feminist stylistics we see how the style and the word choice of the

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author implies how they want their characters to be seen and perceived by the readers.

From the perspective of feminist stylistics, the researchers have analyzed the short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, through the lens of Mills (1995) theory to see how her word choice and style have narrated feminist themes in her short story the yellow wallpaper. Sara Mills (1995) is well known for using a critical approach to discourse analysis to investigate how language affects gendered identities and power relations. She investigates in her work that how language can work as a tool to marginalize women's voices and uphold patriarchal standards, and she stresses the importance of analyzing discourse's structure and contents to comprehend how gender roles have effects on our society. She gave three levels of analysis in her 1995 frameworks. They consist of word level, phrase or sentence level and discourse level.

Feminist stylistics is a growing field in which we have key figures just like Mills who play an important part in shaping and developing this area. But there are some of the prominent figures in feminist stylistics like Deborah Cameron, who gave works like *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1985), and *The Myth of Mars and Venus* (2007), which contributed to exploring how much of the gendered communication patterns are built through social and cultural norm rather than being biologically fixed. According to her, such notion that "men talk like this and women talk like that" are man-made concepts. She advocated for analyzing language as a site where power and ideology come to play, language is not just a jumble of words, rather it holds power and has speaker's ideology behind it. There is also Lesley Jeffries who also contributed by bridging traditional stylistics with CDA (critical discourse analysis) through her work, she revealed how both ideology and gender are present in language.

Research Question

How have different gendered ideologies been propagated through various stylistic moves in the story *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Gilman?

Literature review:

The Yellow Wallpaper has drawn a lot of feminist research over the years, with critics examining how it depicts gender, mental health, and social power dynamics. Foundational readings of the text that place it within larger feminist literary and cultural contexts have been provided by different writers such as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter.

The Yellow Wallpaper is interpreted by Gilbert and Gubar (1979) in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic* 1979 book as the story is built on the narrative of women rebellion against patriarchal oppression. They say that the protagonist's spiral into insanity is a reaction to the literal and symbolic silencing of women's voices. Gilbert and Gubar claim that the protagonist's fixation on the wallpaper represents her battle to break free from the limitations of domesticity and social expectations. Gilbert and Gubar draw attention to how, in this situation, insanity turns into a kind of rebellion. The protagonist symbolically rejects the patriarchal systems that imprison her by pulling down the wallpaper in her final act. Their study centers on the story as a feminist allegory, presenting the protagonist's insanity as a potent indictment of the systems that prevent women from exercising their right to autonomy and self-expression.

In her analysis of gender and insanity, Elaine Showalter (1985) places *The Yellow*

Wallpaper in the context of 19th-century medicine, namely the management of hysteria. Showalter explores in *The Female Malady*; how male physicians categorize women's mental diseases because they saw women's independence and inventiveness as dangers to social order. According to Showalter, the protagonist's diagnosis and course of therapy are a reflection of larger cultural concerns about regulating the behavior of women.

The short story's narrative unreliability is analyzed by Jean Kennard (1981) in her essay "Convention Coverage or How to Read Your Own Life" as a purposeful inversion of traditional storytelling. Kennard emphasizes how conventional ideas of objectivity and logic are undermined by the protagonist's fragmented and subjective narrative style. Gilman questions the legitimacy of male-dominated discourses by focusing on a female narrator whose viewpoint is regarded as untrustworthy by the patriarchal forces in her life.

Kennard's view is consistent with feminist criticisms that highlight *The Yellow Wallpaper*'s subversive potential as a work that highlights the exclusion of women's experiences. The narrator's unreliability is used as a rhetorical device to criticize the systems that silence women.

The story is positioned as an attempt to challenge patriarchal control in Gilbert and Gubar's allegorical interpretation. Nonetheless, Mills' framework makes it possible to examine how the text's stylistic elements carry out this rebellion. For example, it is possible to examine the wallpaper's symbolic resonance both as an allegory and through the particular descriptive language that is employed to portray its eerie quality. Mills' method questions how the protagonist's disjointed descriptions reveal her internal conflict and subvert conventional narrative coherence.

By analyzing the language and style of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* through a feminist lens of Sara Mills of feminist stylistic, this study shows Gilman challenges patriarchy through a feminist analysis of "The Yellow Wallpaper" language and style, this study shows how Gilman challenges gender conventions and patriarchal power structures while utilizing narrative structure, first person format and linguistic features to express her feminist message of women's freedom. This approach advances the larger goal of advancing gender equality and diversity in literature by providing a greater knowledge of the ways that language and style are employed in literature to both reflect and combat gender stereotypes.

Theoretical and Methodological perspectives

This research employs qualitative research method with feminist stylistic analysis. This analysis employs Sara Mill's (1995) approach of feminist stylistics frameworks in which she focuses on how language is used in literature to either reinforce or negate the existing gender stereotypes.

Mills (1995) discusses how ideology and power and interlinked with each other that women are most of the time unvoiced actor in a story where as men are the ones who are voiced and their voices are being heard. The ideology of the powerful will always have an effect on how the language is going to be perceived. In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the one narrating the story is the female character which makes it a first-person narration that helps us get a closer and better understating of who is being authoritative and who is being marginalized.

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Passivization

According to Mills, stylistic analysis from a feminist perspective works at three interrelated levels which are lexical, grammatical, and discourse. At the lexical level, the choice of words can reflect underlying gender ideologies, as seen in the use of endearments, or stereotypical labels that being put on women which infantilize or objectify women. At the grammatical level, Mills highlights processes such as passivization, which talks about how subtly language is encoded through gendered power relations. Finally, at the discourse level, Mills argues that the voices of the powerful are heard.

Silencing

This study employs Mills (1995)' discourse-level analysis to investigate how silencing is used linguistically in "The Yellow Wallpaper" The narrator's first-person diary entries represent a site of refuge where her repressed voice is expressed. Her speech is seen as fragmented, and hesitant features which reflected her fragmented identity. John's authoritative speech which hinders narrator's linguistic freedom, reflecting what Mills discussed as male authoritative language which is characterized by rationality, certainty, and control In contrast, the narrator's language is identified by passivization ("I am to lie down ever so much now") and ("I suppose John knows best"), both of these examples show the difference in how grammar encodes female dependence at grammatical level.

Analysis

Gilman through language , the narrative structure and the interaction between the narrator and her husband shows the power dynamics between the two and the patriarchal control. Through these elements Gilman not only challenges the patriarchal society but also shows how silencing, language and fragmented expression act as identity markers for the users.

Linguistic Features

Linguistic features which consist of diction and contrast between the narrator's and John's language play an important role in showcasing the power dynamics.

John's Diction: Authoritative and Dismissive

Language is not a neutral medium just as it can be seen in "the yellow wallpaper" that John often uses language in a way which highlights his authority and control. Mills (1995) argues that language is not just a tool for communication but it is ideological and reflects power dynamics. His language shows dismissal of his wife's concerns and desires as being foolish shows men speech as a fact and women's speech demonstrated as an opinion. Mills opined those men are seen as more objective and rational in social context which creates this hierarchy. John's dismissive tone which can be seen by "And what can one do?" reduces the narrator's illness to something trivial. He continuously speaks in such a way that highlights him an expert and capable of doing everything. His language infantilizes the narrator, calling her "little girl" or "bless her heart," suggesting she is incapable of understanding her condition and that her voice is not worth listening to.

Narrator's Diction: Fragmented and Hesitant

According to Mills (1995) framework fragmentation in language use is a reflection of women's lack of speech how the narrator's diction shows her struggles with her mental health and how she is losing control over herself which results in her mental health declining as the time passes. She often uses hesitations and self-doubt in her language, which shows her struggles. The phrase "but John says..." reflects her internal conflict, where she is aware of her own desires but is silenced by John's authoritative control. Her syntax here is disjointed, mirroring the fractured nature of her thoughts and her repressed sense of agency. This fragmentation manifests in the narrators' entries, which are short, abrupt and are marked by the author through the use of dashes, pauses and the narrators' incomplete thoughts. "I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe—and follow that pattern about by the hour." The way her sentence starts to break which also implies her nervous and unstable mental state. Her fragmented words reflect how disconnected she is from reality and slowly she is losing herself to her illness.

Narrative Structure

The first-person point of view gives us insight on what is going on in the mind of the narrator including her mental health, her thoughts and her fragmented perception over time. Mills (1995) Emphasizes that how a literary work is narrated is important to positioning of subjects being discussed. Similarly, *The Yellow wallpaper* uses first person narration where the narrator tells the story through her perspective, first person narration ("I") becomes a place where the narrator reveals her struggles within a patriarchal society. It makes way for her to take control of her own story which shows her ownership of herself and her story. The first-person narration can be seen as through as Ivanič, (1998) argues that the use of pronouns in work shows how ideologically inclined the author is and these selves are realized through linguistics choice of the author. Likewise, the use of first-person pronoun ("I") in this short story is the presentation of self and the oppression women faced in those times which showcases author's need to voicing the unvoiced. It also connotes the degree of certainty on the part of narrator about the story being narrated. As she admits, "There comes John, and I must put this away, —he hates to have me write a word." Mills maintains that how women are not given spaces to discursive places where they can practice their agency. This is how, the first-person narration becomes a means of certainty and proceeding from self to universal.

Passivization: Shifts in Tone and Focus

Mills (1995), argues that language use is never neutral and most often passivization is used for the oppressed class. The identity of the oppressor is sometimes deliberately kept hidden. Similarly, the text under analysis reveals that narrator has been shown as a passive agent at the mercy of the powerful. The narrator's tone is somewhat more submissive and reflective. She writes, "I am rather glad to be here, with John and my sister-in-law. And it is so pleasant to be out in the country." This passive tone reflects her initial acceptance of her confinement. However, as the story progresses, her tone becomes more conflicted and obsessive. Her attention shifts from descriptions of the setting of the room to the wallpaper and her growing obsession with it, "I lie here on this great immovable bed...and lie here for hours. I get so angry I could scream." The focus of the journal entries also shifts from external observations to internal struggles,

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and the tone becomes increasingly desperate and fragmented. The narrator's thoughts grow less coherent, reflecting her mental breakdown and resistance to the societal shackles imposed on her. Throughout the story we see how the sense of reality of the narrator's begins to crumble which can be seen in, "I have been watching this wallpaper for a long time. I think that woman gets out in the daytime!". The tone of the story becomes more erratic as the mental health of the narrator becomes worse. This brings to light on how the shift is shown intimately in the usage of first-person pronoun. This shift also gives narrator a fragmented idea of reality.

Silencing

Mills (1995) believes that powerful has right and might to decide that who will speak and what will speak. The voices of the powerful are heard at the cost of powerless. Similarly, the narrator has also experienced silencing by her husband who has forbidden her from writing which is her way of telling her truth, without her writings, she feels herself lost. For example, she is told by John that she must not write, which she ignores, reflecting her subtle resistance. She writes in the journal, "I lie here on this great immovable bed...I get so angry I could scream." This implies her powerlessness and emotional disturbance. Her act of writing becomes an act of rebellion against the social and medical rules that restrict her voice. "He hates me write a word", here narrator reveals how her husband John hates her writing which is a way of silencing her voice which reflects herself as imprisoned totally at the mercy of her husband.

Analysis and Discussion

Mills (1995) opines that linguistic and stylistic framing of a person and event is of vital importance is propagating desired ideology about in/out group. She believes that female characters are often presented in such a way that it limits their identity and agency. Also, this type of representation could reinforce the stereotypes that exists in our society. This can be seen in the yellow wallpaper that the narrator's confinement and her descent to madness is an example of how patriarchal language limits female agency. By this, the researchers identified that the narrator voices the story and her position seems dependent throughout the story. This minimizing of her voice shows how her husband is infantilizing her. The power dynamics between the two are shown as her being the one whose ideas and agency is being dismissed consistently. "John is a physician, and perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster." Gilman shows how the narrator is submissive to her husband which is reflected in her sentences, this reveals the protagonist psychological and emotional state. She is dependent on her husband even if she wants or not. From her sentence structure we can see that John is reinforcing his authority on her.

Interruption and Silencing

Mills (1995) asserts that most often female voices are suppressed and silenced in male dominant societies. This is done to marginalize them from the domains of power. Same is obvious from the selected chunk from the text under analysis.

"I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition" The lines mentioned above illustrate that John is least concerned about the needs of the narrator which can be seen throughout the story. Whenever the narrator would

show the desire of going out John would dismiss her by insisting that he knows better than her as he is a physician so he knows better than a housewife. His dismissal of her not only ends in her confinement in that room but also stops her from writing. John's language use is bossy and authoritative and considers her concerns as silly things.

Subjectivity and Fragmented Narrative

There is also a presence of multiple voices in the yellow wallpaper which we see through the breakdown of the narrator as she navigates through not only her mental illness but also the dismissal of her concerns. This breakdown gives us conflicting viewpoints about the female characters. The narrator's voice provides an insight of her inner thoughts and how it is conflicting with the authoritative voice of her husband. This illustrates female's positioning in patriarchal society. Her obsession with the woman in the wallpaper also reflects the fragmented identity. The language used by her also implies her disturbed state of mind.

Symbolism and imagery used in the text correlates with confused state of mind. The concept of word picture conjunction has been used effectively to convey the meanings. Gilman shows how the obsession of the narrator with the woman in the wallpaper has to do with her own confinement in her own house which is supposed to be a safe space for her. This symbolizes how the narrator relates with the woman in the wallpaper is actually a reflection of the narrator herself. The narrator is stuck in the room which is her personal prison in the same way that the woman in the wallpaper is stuck in the wallpaper. There are not only psychical "barred" barriers around her but also metaphorical which are imposed from the patriarchal society. Her act of tearing down the wallpaper in the end is also her tearing down the act of being a stereotypical woman. The list of terms related to confinement, "wall," "barred," "stuck" and liberation "escape," "freedom" implies her confinement and feelings of liberty. The concept of visual coherence has been observed in the narration of the novel. The use of first-person narration style connotes certainty and degree of individuality.

Conclusion:

The analysis of the data reveals that Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a powerful critique of patriarchal oppression. It shows Gilman's language and stylistic choices are apt to convey the meanings. It highlights that no use of language is ideology free and Gilman's use of stylistic devices highlights and challenges the existing gender stereotypes about female subjugation. Her internal struggles are captured through the use of first-person perspective while her fragmented identity and awareness of her oppression is reflected through the use of uncoherent sentences. The study finds that though the concept of change and female liberation is very much there, yet the constructed gender stereotypes are observed mostly in male dominant societies. The findings of the study also support the stance that literature mirrors existing social reality of a particular context.

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