

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**PATRIARCHY'S CONTROL ON THE NARRATOR IN CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S  
THE YELLOW WALLPAPER****CHALAK GHAFOOR RAOUF**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper studies Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* from a feminist perspective. It examines the methods that are used by the male-dominated society for controlling the narrator's body and mind. The patriarchal society employs separation, discipline, and surveillance for controlling the narrator's body, while uses language for controlling her mind. Therefore, this article explores the elements that aid the society's control on the narrator's body and mind.

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Control, Separation, Discipline, Surveillance, Language.

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**INTRODUCTION**

*The Yellow Wallpaper* is one of the earliest American feminist works by Charlotte Perkins Gilman that was published for the first time in 1892. It presents women's suffering under the authoritative power that aims at establishing a patriarchal system that considers women as inferior to men and treat them like children who need "guidance and protection" (Kasmer, 6). Gilman wrote this story in sympathy with women of her time, which were controlled by the absolute power of the male-dominated society,

in order to demonstrate "how women have been socially, historically, and medically constructed as a weak, but sick beings" (Suess, 80).

Gilman in writing this story was influenced by her own life, in which she experienced a miserable life in her childhood as well as her marriage. Her parents separated after her birth, and this caused economic problems for her in a way she described her childhood as "painful and lonely" (Gilman 1656). Being affected by this, Gilman married to Charles Stetson to compensate her

pervious life, but one year from her marriage, she gave birth to her only child, Kathrine, and thereby, she entered the difficulties of life that manifested itself in her duties as mother and wife. As her "marital tension increased", her husband believed that she had a mental depression, therefore, he consulted a specialist of women's nervous disorder "Dr. Mitchell" that prescribed her a rest cure for several weeks, which was consisted of bed rest without any intellectual activities (1656).

After Gilman anticipated the disadvantages of the treatments, she refused to be treated in that way, and thereby, came back from a state of madness as a result of her condition during the rest cure in which she was imprisoned in a room without allowing her to touch a pen. Gilman continued her life as a writer, and wrote poems, short stories, and lectures to resist "women's suffering" in her society which Gilman considered it as a social problem. Thus, the idea of female empowerment emerged in her thoughts as she became aware of the injustice around women of her society (1656). Therefore, being affected by her confinement, Gilman dramatized her experience during the rest cure in *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

#### **Patriarchal Control:**

##### **1. Separation**

Elisheva Sadan in his book *Empowerment and Community Planning* argues, "separation is a more complex kind of lack of knowledge. It expresses itself in lack of information about others who share the same fate, with whom it's possible to create an alliance in order to resist the power" (47). Usually, most of the totalitarian societies start the process of controlling women by separating them. Through separation, these societies disarm women and confine them at a place in order to be reconstructed according to some certain rules. Separation helps the authoritative powers to avoid women's resistance because women through separation lose contact with each other, and thereby, they cannot make alliances with others to resist the power.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the male-dominated society employs separation as first step of gaining control over the narrator's body after she

gives birth because she is not performing her duty as a mother that will help the society to process better, as appear in her speech, "it is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby, I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous" (1660). Therefore, the society uses the narrator's post-natal depression to justify her confinement, and to produce her docile body. John through separation wants to recreate the narrator and reshape her according to his preferences. He wants a Victorian ideal wife that her duty is limited for reproducing and house working, but Gilman's narrator does not have this maternal feeling, therefore, she does not want to be a part of this conventional belief about wife and motherhood. The narrator considers motherhood as a type of discipline that isolates women from society and confine them at home. Therefore, to control her thoughts concerning maternity, the society separates the narrator in order to regulate her again.

The narrator's separation can be observed clearly in her description of the house where she was confined in by her husband, "Ancestral halls, at the top of the house, have stood so long untenanted, It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, three miles from the village" (1658). Here, Gilman describes the narrator's condition in the house where she was confined in. The house was uninhabited one with "hedges, walls, and gates that lock", and it was three miles away from the society (1658). In this story, the description of the house presents two metaphorical purposes; in one hand suggests the trapped condition of the narrator, and on the other hand intensifies the patriarchal forces. At

Gilman's time, majority of women were trapped in home, prevented from gaining knowledge, and deprived from their rights by the male-dominated society, therefore, Gilman used the house to suggest the patriarchal control on women of her society.

To achieve control over women in the patriarchal societies, usually the authoritative powers isolate individuals through attacking the social institutes such as the family in order to correct them individually. In this story, the family is also

attacked in order to regulate the narrator as appears in her confinement in a room alone without her husband, as she writes; "The room is not for two beds" (1658). Here, it is clear that, the narrator's society wants to separate her from her husband in order to achieve an absolute control over her body and mind.

ElishevaSadan quotes from Foucault, "power not only operates in a specific sphere of social life, but occurs at sites of all kinds and seizes, including the most minute and most intimate, such as the human body" (57). According to this view, the authoritative powers regulate society by programming individuals, and regulate individuals by regulating their body and aspects of life. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the patriarchal system to protect the male-dominated society from the narrator's thoughts concerning motherhood, separates the narrator from society to regulate her body and mind according to the society's standard value. Since the narrator is not fulfilling her duties as a mother, therefore, the patriarchal society operates its power through isolating her in order to make her follow the rules of society and accept her social function as a mother.

## 2. Discipline

Sara Mills, in her book, *Michel Foucault*, discusses the idea of discipline depending on Mitchell Foucault's theory of power;

"Discipline is a set of strategies, procedures and ways of behaving which are associated with certain institutional contexts and which then permeate ways of thinking and behaving in general. Discipline consists of a concern with control which is internalized by each individual like time-keeping, self-control over one's posture and bodily functions, and concentration" (43).

It can be said that, discipline regulates body of individuals according to some rules, and thereby, change their thoughts according to these rules through disciplining their daily life. Authoritative powers through discipline isolate individuals in a place that does not give them "a fixed position" to think about themselves, and through schedules they make the individual's body be in a continuous busyness (Foucault, 148).

Discipline is an effective strategy for controlling large group of people through

segregating, training, and manipulating them according to some rules. To establish a disciplinary society, these systems label citizens into groups, train them through language, and monitor them through a military surveillance. Through discipline, "energy of the body is controlled, developed, and later is reversed to be a restraint, a power of subjection" (Khouhestani, 610). Through discipline, the systems control individuals' body in which they reverse individual's energy for their interest.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as the narrator finds herself in the prisonlike room, she faces another element of control that manifest itself in the discipline of her husband and doctor's medication. The patriarchal system prevents the narrator's imaginations by employing discipline to make her body be busy with following the schedules and time-tables that her husband and doctor put for her, therefore, the society does not give the narrator a space to think about herself, as she writes; "John hardly lets me stir without special direction, I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day, He said your exercise depends on your strength your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time, making me lie down for an hour after each meal" (1659-60). Here, appears that John is trying to gain control over the narrator's body through disciplining every aspect of her life, including her behaviors, sleeping, time, and food, and the only thing that John allows her to do all the time is breathing.

John through discipline tries to schedule the narrator's life in order to regulate her body and recreate an obedient wife according to the Victorian criteria because the narrator is not fulfilling her duty as a mother like a Victorian woman. Therefore, this discipline demonstrates John's intelligence, because it gives him the opportunity to make the narrator's body and mind busy with following his schedules and forget about her mental activity, and an hour of sleep after each meal is set to prevent the narrator's mental activities. Jonathan Crewe argues, "the room in which the narrator is confined has been some kind of schoolroom or gymnasium means that she has correctly divined its functions as a scene of disciplinary schooling" (275). The narrator in her new place, like a schoolroom, her movement is limited, her speaking, writing, and sleeping are

programmed. The narrator does not allowed to make decision, but instead her husband decides what to do. Therefore, the narrator, by entering the house, she loses control over her body and mind.

### 3. Surveillance

Mitchell Foucault, in his book, *Discipline and Punishment*, discusses the concept of surveillance with reference to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, as he says; "Panopticon is an instrument of power and observation which provide an efficient mean of control through minimal effort, it could be used to alter behaviors, to train or correct individuals, it is capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible" (200).

Foucault demonstrates that Panopticon can be employed to change the individuals' behaviors, and train them according to some specific rules. When individuals being subjected to it, they internalize the fear of being watched by the authoritative power, thereby, even in the absence of the guards the subjects perform their duties regularly. Therefore, the importance of panopticon lies in its invisibility that regulates the subject's body and mind with a minimum effort. It works as an internal monitor that prevent the subjects from resisting the power.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the patriarchal society to ensure the narrator's docility employs continuous surveillance to make her behave according to the society's preferences. This monitoring is presented through John's monitoring over the narrator that "hardly let her without special direction" (Treichler, 329). In spite of her confinement in a house with a barred window and locked doors, the narrator still cannot do anything because of her society's patriarchy that follows her everywhere. This patriarchal monitoring creates a miserable life for her that prevents her from writing, thinking, and going outside the home. The only thing that John allows her to do is breathing, as appears in his speech "but air you can you can absorb all the time" (1660).

### 4. Language

In most of the tyrant systems, language plays an important role in controlling women, because by language, these systems implant their ideologies in the women's mind in order to make them follow their rules without questioning. Usually,

in these societies one individual holds power, and impose his ideology over the others through language, therefore, there is a strong relationship between power and language. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault reveals his idea on language in constructing statement:

"To speak (use language) is to do something-something other than to express what one thinks; to translate what one knows, and something other than to play with the structures of a language. To show that to add a statement to a pre-existing series of statements is to perform a complicated and costly gesture". (230).

Here, Foucault explains the duty of language which is more than expressing one's feeling or communicating with others, but rather language can be used for internalizing the hearers' mind, and thereby, change their thoughts and perceptions according to the speaker's preferences.

Therefore, language can be used as a tool that produces power, and helps those who uses it to reinforce their positions by imposing their ideologies in the subject's mind.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, we have an individual that represented by the narrator's husband who takes power, and uses language to make the narrator normalize her conditions, as it is clear in the narrator's speech, "John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad" (Gilman 1658). This speech reveals that, the narrator is completely manipulated by the patriarchal language of John, and her confession shows the effect of language that makes her believe in what John says about her condition. Therefore, language fixes the patriarchal ideologies in the narrator's mind. Treichler argues, "language is male-controlled and remain with the more specific charge that the discourse of medical diagnosis is a prime example of patriarchal discourse" (373). The patriarchal society through patriarchal language of medicine suppresses any attempt that may interfere with the narrator's effort to make herself good.

With the power of language and its influences on his wife, John tries to confuse the narrator's mind by nurturing it with some ideologies that keep her in control, and the influence of John's

language use can be observed clearly in the narrator's speech;

"John 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/ half the time I am awfully lazy/ John says it is good for me to sleep all I can/ John says I mustn't lose my strength, and has me take cod liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat/ I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you/ sometimes I get unreasonably angry, I think it is due to this nervous condition" (1658-64).

The above speech reveals that the narrator is completely surrendered to the patriarchal language of her society because she believes the speeches of John concerning her conditions. The phrase which the narrator uses "John says" is an indication of the effect of John's language use over her in which she cannot decide on her condition or utter a different interpretation. John tells the narrator to sleep as much as she can, his command can be considered as another usage of language because John realizes that, through sleeping, he would prevent the narrator's thinking.

In this story, the patriarchal system uses language as a tool that helps them to colonize the narrator's mind, and thereby, to reconstruct her according to its criteria. Language here, plays the role of a silent weapon that its influences can be observed obviously in the narrators speech, as she writes, "He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself of his sake, and keep well" (1663). Here, the narrator appears as if being deceived by the patriarchal language of John. Although she is confined by John and suffers from his oppression, but she seeks his pleasure, and her only aim is to recover for the sake of John not for the sake of herself.

### 5. Nature

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the garden is presented as a false representation of nature that created by the patriarchal gardeners as the patriarchal treatment of John. In the garden, the narrator is confined in a closed garden as she was confined in the house with a locked door. As the narrator's freedom in the room was limited for

breathing and creeping, therefore, in the garden, narrator's freedom is also limited for breathing and creeping since both of the places are dominated by patriarchy. The garden here is controlled by the narrator's society to serve its interests that manifests itself in maintaining power over the narrator. Therefore, the artificial nature can be considered as another element of control that aids the society's control on the narrator. Simon Pugh, in his work, *Garden-Nature-Language*, suggests, "The garden is the representation of nature that masquerades as a mimesis of what it repressed but which is really a total reconstruction of what is repressed" (127).

Here, Pugh means that, the patriarchal system reconstructed nature in order to serve its purpose, therefore, the nature of this society lost its meaning, it's no longer natural, but it is an artificial nature that designed for confining women.

When the narrator talks with Jennie to let her enjoy a walk in the garden, Jennie agrees and takes her to the garden through a series of "borders, lanes, hedges, and locked gates" (Schweninger, 31).

When she enters the garden, the narrator soon discovers that the garden is also "a literal prison" that is separated from the natural wilderness by walls, hedges, and locked gates, and the walls are "sunk in ditches" and covered by leaves of trees (Schweninger, 30). Gilman's narrator believes that the garden which represents nature is also controlled by her society, and what she saw from the window is not more than a mere artificial nature. In the garden, the narrator is surrounded by walls and locked gates of patriarchy that limits her freedom. Schweninger says;

"In the context of Gilman's story, the garden typifies one particular way of validating power over nature, much as a male doctor's prescribed rest cure constitutes a way of maintaining power over a patient, wife, or woman. Therefore, the garden becomes the site of limits, of control, of the artificial, of denial, of the male's triumph over the wildness of nature" (27).

Here, I think by controlling the garden or the natural wilderness, Gilman wants to talk about the patriarchal control on women outside home. Although the narrator can go outside the locked doors of the house where she is confined in, but she

faces the doors of society or patriarchy that controls her and limits her movement. Although changes happen in the narrator's condition, but the patriarchal control remains the same.

#### CONCLUSION

This article examined the elements that aid the male society's control on the narrator's body and mind in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. It concluded that, the patriarchal society in this story, controls the narrator's body and mind through separation, discipline, and language. The society uses, separation, and discipline for controlling the narrator's body, while uses language for controlling her mind. Through separation, this society disarms the narrator through creating a state of isolation in which she lacks information about others who share the same problem with her, and through surveillance, the society creates routine in the narrator's mind, and thereby, change her behavior, according to the society's preferences. After controlling the narrator's body, the society uses language to control her mind. The male-dominated society uses language to colonize the narrator's mind, and impose its ideology in her mind. Therefore, the society, through separation, discipline, surveillance, and use of language creates the narrator's docile body.

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