



Exploring Women's Mental Health in the Yellow Wallpaper: A Medical Humanities Perspective

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Abstract— This study examines the complex portrayal of women's mental health and the treatment of mental illness in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", based on the principles of medical humanities. The study contextualizes the protagonist's struggle in the social and medical landscapes of the late 19th century. The story unfolds against the backdrop of prevailing gender norms and the rise of the medical profession, particularly the controversial "rest cure" for women. Analyzing the Imprisonment of the main character in a room decorated with yellow wallpaper, the study reveals the layers of meaning and symbolism. From the lens of medical humanities, the study sheds light on gender bias in diagnosis, the ethical dimensions of medical procedures, and the impact on caregivers, especially the dual role of the protagonist's husband as both physician and husband. Additionally, the study links historical attitudes toward women and mental health to contemporary debates about mental health stigma, gender bias in medical diagnosis, and patient narratives. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the intersection of medicine, gender and social expectations. It provides insight into the issues of women in relation to historical health care settings and responds to the health care debates of today.

Keywords— rest cure, imprisonment, gender bias, medical diagnosis, mental health.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1800s, a period marked by limited medical understanding and entrenched gender roles, women's mental health was often oversimplified and misunderstood. "The Yellow Wallpaper" provides a literary snapshot of this era, offering a nuanced depiction of the protagonist's mental struggles within the constraints of societal expectations. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" serves as a compelling narrative that explores women's mental health within the framework of medical humanities. The backdrop of the late 19th century, the story weaves together elements of literature, history, and medical practices, portrays the complex interplay of societal norms, gender expectations, and the evolving landscape of healthcare's title "The Yellow Wallpaper" serves as a symbolic manifestation of the protagonist's deteriorating mental state and the broader confinement of women in a patriarchal society. The evolving patterns in the wallpaper mirror the protagonist's descent into madness. The story raises questions about autonomy, agency, and the societal

expectations that stifled women's voices and contributed to their mental distress. Written in 1892, the long story or a novella serves as an allegorical portrayal of female repression and is a significant and influential work of feminist literature.

Beyond its historical context, "The Yellow Wallpaper" remains relevant in contemporary discussions on women's health. Medical humanities lens allows to bridge the temporal gap and draw parallels with present-day challenges in understanding and addressing mental health issues, particularly those affecting women and Gilman here explain the battle with postpartum depression and the doctors she dealt with during her illness inspired her to write "The Yellow Wallpaper."

HYSTERIA – THE FEMALE MALADY:

The term "hysteria" has a deep historical connection to women's mental health, and in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Charlotte Perkins Gilman explores its impact on the protagonist within the framework of medical humanities. Hysteria, derived from the Greek word uterus, has a long

history in medical discourse, particularly in the context of women's health. The large part of the suffering of women was classified in a term called hysteria, which could basically mean nervous illness, nervous breakdown and hysteria is seen as a female malady. Hysteria was considered as a pseudo symptom, a pseudo disease and not a real disease and different kinds of treatment which were given to female hysterics. There was a list of female writers who suffered from hysteria, and they wrote their experience and Gilman's book is one of them and we have Virginia Woolf who wrote a series of writing, on her experience with nervous illness and how she was essentially mistreated by the medical industry.

In the story, the protagonist's descent into hysteria is intricately tied to her confinement and the oppressive environment she finds herself in. The isolated room, coupled with the relentless scrutiny of her doctor husband and the insidious presence of the complex yellow wallpaper, and that becomes a crucible for the manifestation of her mental distress. From the context of medical humanities, the characterization of hysteria as a "female malady" reflects the intersection of societal expectations and medical narratives. The societal roles imposed on women during this era constrained their autonomy, stifled intellectual pursuits, and contributed to mental distress. The term "female malady" encapsulates the gendered lens through which mental health issues were perceived and treated. The designation of hysteria as a female malady is not just a historical artifact but an exploration of power dynamics and challenges to women's autonomy. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' the protagonist's agency is gradually eroded by both societal expectations and the medical advice of her husband, illustrating the broader theme of how women's mental health was understood and controlled. From a medical humanities perspective, the story prompts reflection on how far we've come in understanding and addressing women's mental health.

In the realm of medical humanities perspective, the protagonist's character provokes reflection on how far we have come in understanding and treating women's mental health. Although progress has been made, challenges remain, and the term "women's malady" is a reminder of historical baggage that continues to influence contemporary conversations. Essentially, Gilman's examination of hysteria in The Yellow Wallpaper in the context of the medical humanities is a profound commentary on the historical medicalization of women's mental health. This book challenges readers to critically consider how social expectations and medical narratives intersect and influence perceptions of mental health and autonomy, promoting empathy and patient-centered care.

POSTPARTUM PHYSOSIS IN THE NINETEEN CENTURY:

Gilman's experience of postpartum psychosis examines the intersection of mental health, motherhood, and societal expectations. This exploration within the realm of medical humanities draws parallels between the protagonist's struggles in the late 19th century and the contemporary landscape surrounding postpartum mental health.

In those days, the understanding of postpartum mental health was rudimentary, often ruined by misconceptions and stigmatization. The protagonist's descent into psychosis mirrors the lack of awareness and empathy surrounding postpartum mental health during that era. Gilman uses the deteriorating mental state of the protagonist, affected by postpartum psychosis, as a metaphorical expression of societal constraints on women. The confinement to the room with the oppressive yellow wallpaper mirrors the confinement of women's roles in both domestic and medical spheres.

THE REST CURE DILEMMA:

In the late 1800s, the rest cure gained popularity as a response to perceived nervous afflictions, especially prevalent among women. The treatment aimed to alleviate symptoms through physical and mental rest. However, it often meant confining women to a prescribed set of activities, restricting intellectual engagement and social interactions. It was systematized by Silas Weir Mitchell, the rest cure, as portrayed in 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' reflects a patriarchal medical approach that curtailed women's agency. Gilman over here gives the description of treatment in form of confinement, a selective diet, forbidden to write and forced to rest and the term claustrophobia is produced out of confinement, so the place of confinement plays a very important role. It reduced them to passive recipients of treatment, reinforcing societal expectations of women as submissive and devoid of intellectual capabilities. While the rest cure was intended to heal, its restrictive nature exacerbated mental distress. "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman explores various themes, including the crisis of communication, particularly within the context of gender roles and mental health. Here are some aspects related to the crises of communication in the story:

SUPPRESSION OF WOMENS VOICE AND EXPRESSION OF THOUGHTS:

The protagonist, a woman suffering from mental distress and trauma, experiences suppression of voice becoming a powerless entity in the hand of her husband. Her husband John, the physician, controls her and dismisses her in an alienated space refraining her from physical activity including writing. The societal expectation of women in the 19th century often led to their voices being stifled, especially

regarding matters of mental health. The protagonist's attempts to communicate her experiences with the wallpaper and her declining mental state are consistently dismissed by her husband, who employs a dismissive and gaslighting approach. The crisis of communication arises from the inability of those in authority to understand or accept the woman's perspective. The protagonist resorts to secret writing to express herself without direct confrontation. This act is both a coping mechanism and a response to the communication barriers imposed by societal norms. The protagonist's isolation in the room with the yellow wallpaper intensifies the crisis of communication. She lacks a support system and is deprived of meaningful interaction. In addition, her loneliness and her state of idleness and inactivity deteriorated her mental health.

The yellow wallpaper itself becomes a symbol of the barriers to effective communication. Its chaotic patterns represent the disarray in the protagonist's mind, and her attempts to communicate this are consistently ignored. The story reflects on the power dynamics in relationships and how these dynamics impact communication. In essence, "The Yellow Wallpaper" underscores the challenges women faced in expressing themselves, particularly in matters related to mental health, during a time when societal norms and gender roles were restrictive.

HALLUCINATION: THE RESULT OF IMPRISONMENT

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," hallucinations play a central role in portraying the protagonist's deteriorating mental state. The yellow wallpaper in his cell became the catalyst for hallucinatory experiences. The isolation caused her no good. Her isolation has exacerbated her trauma, intensifying its impact. The narrator focusing on the intricate patterns of the wallpaper, believed that there are women trapped behind it, reflecting her own feelings of being trapped. As the story unfolds, the main character's hallucinations intensify, deteriorating the difference between reality and her distorted perceptions. The connection between hallucinogens and yellow wallpaper highlights the psychological impact of prescribed rest cures and the oppressive gender norms prevalent in the late 19th century. It manifests the protagonist's silent pain, echoing larger themes of female autonomy and mental health.

This connection highlights how physical and metaphorical confinement in the story contributes to the protagonist's descent into madness, highlighting the detrimental effects of social expectations on an individual mental health. Also, it remains as a powerful exploration of the intersection between mental health, gender roles and social constraints, resonating with readers as a poignant commentary on the mind. In a contemporary context, "The

Yellow Wallpaper" resonates with its themes of mental health struggles and social pressures that persist to this present day. The yellow background, symbolizing the main character's descent into madness in the original story, can be seen as a metaphor for the challenges which are being faced by individuals in navigating mental health amid the expectations of this modern society.

In recent times, hallucinations are not only limited to the common understanding of mental disorders; but also extends to societal pressures, the digital realm, and the relentless pursuit of perfection. The constant bombardment of curated images and ideals on social media platforms can be seen as a contemporary counterpoint to the protagonist's fixation on yellow wallpaper. The virtual world becomes a distorted reflection, contributing to a sense of disillusionment and distortion of reality. Additionally, the expectations placed on individuals, especially women, to conform to certain norms and roles persist. The fast pace and demanding lifestyle of the modern world can cause a kind of social illusion, in which individuals may feel obligated to maintain a façade of success and happiness, despite the potential difficulties. It provokes reflection on the impact of external pressures, both historical and present, on individual well-being and the urgency to promote a more compassionate and understanding society in the face of challenges that keep changing.

PATRIARCHAL MEDICAL SYSTEM:

The story opens through the perspective of a woman suffering from postpartum depression, locked in a room by her husband who is a doctor by profession. This confinement becomes a metaphor for the broader social constraints imposed on women. The patriarchal medical system is evident in the husband's authoritative role as a caregiver and a decision maker. He overrules the narrator's instincts and locks her in a room, prescribing rest, a common treatment at the time. This remedy reflects the widespread belief that women's mental health problems could be cured by leaving them in isolation and inactivity, and sheds light on the patriarchal attitude towards the medical establishment. The protagonist's husband, her physician, epitomizes the patriarchal medical system that dismissed women's concerns. This dynamic view raises ethical questions about the intersectionality of gender and medical care, opening avenues for exploring the power dynamics within healthcare settings. The wallpaper itself has become a symbol of an oppressive medical system. When the narrator is haunted by her role model, it reflects women's bondage to societal expectations and intricate norms. The gradual descent into madness reflects the harmful effects of a medical system that disregards and disconcerts women's autonomy which eventually silences

them, turning them into powerless and helpless human beings.

CONCLUSION: LEARNING FROM HISTORY, SHAPING ETHICAL MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICES

Acknowledging the historical impact of the rest cure prompts a critical examination of current mental health practices. The narrative in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' serves as a cautionary tale, urging mental health professionals to adopt ethical and patient-centered approaches that empower individuals rather than confine them. In today's context, discussions around mental health strive to destigmatize conditions and promote holistic well-being. The rest cure narrative reinforces the importance of recognizing individual agency, addressing the root causes of mental distress, and fostering open dialogues that consider diverse perspectives.

In the present day, awareness and understanding of postpartum mental health have evolved, yet challenges persist. Medical humanities prompt an exploration of how societal expectations and stigmas still affect women navigating the complexities of motherhood and mental health. The narrative of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' remains relevant, urging us to reflect on the progress made and the work yet to be done in destigmatizing postpartum mental health issues. While specific cases of postpartum psychosis and individuals affected by it may not always be publicly disclosed or documented, postpartum mental health challenges, including psychosis, are recognized and experienced by women globally, including in India. It's important to approach such topics with sensitivity and respect for individuals' privacy. In India, where maternal mental health is an emerging area of concern, efforts are being made to address postpartum mental health issues. Public figures and celebrities have shared their experiences with postpartum depression, contributing to awareness and reducing stigma. However, specific cases of postpartum psychosis may not always be publicly discussed.

The Intersectionality of gender and medical narratives comes to light in both historical and contemporary contexts. The societal expectations of women as nurturers and caregivers intersect with medical perspectives, influencing how postpartum mental health is understood and addressed through this novella. Medical humanities encourage critical examination of these gendered narratives, fostering empathy and advocating for patient-centered care.

- [2] <https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/healthhumanities/Definitions>
- [3] <https://www.dukechronicle.com/article/2022/09/092922-anand-beyond-the-yellow-wallpaper-medical-gaslighting#:~:text=Such%20is%20the%20plight%20of,recover%20from%20her%20hysterical%20tendencies.>

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