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Article · March 2021

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Interpreting 'madwomen': A Study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Pratibha Ray's "The Eyes"

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Abstract: This paper explores the theme of madness in two short stories by women writers. Mental ailments like 'madness,' 'hysteria' and 'nervous condition' are readily associated with women. This paper aims to go beyond the actual illnesses and socially constructed definitions to investigate the implications of 'insanity' and the causes that lead to a woman being labelled 'mad.' While Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is written in the late nineteenth-century America, Pratibha Ray's story "The Eyes" is situated in Odisha in the late twentieth century. This paper would investigate the different yet related concerns that these two authors address.

Keywords: Women's writing, madness, feminism, female authors, marriage, female psyche.

Marriage and motherhood are supposed to be the ultimate source of happiness for women, or at least that's what society would have them believe. But what happens when the men who were supposed to be their partners and provide love and companionship, become the source of constant, subtle, or even explicit forms of oppression, exploitation and psychological torment for women?

This paper offers a close textual analysis of two short stories by women writers who delve into questions regarding women, their place in society, and explores very minutely, their psychological spaces that inspire their thought and action. The first story I have selected is "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), a semi-autobiographical work by the American author Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a 'utopian feminist.' The second story is "The Eyes" (1980) by Padma Shri awardee Pratibha Ray, an Odia woman writer. The emphasis of the study is on the theme of 'madness' when it afflicts women, and its causes. The stories deal with two female protagonists who are trapped in a world that controls every aspect of their existence.

'Madness' has been a part of numerous pieces of literature over the centuries. The Victorian era saw a rise in the trope of madness in writings by women authors. Helen Small observes how a "madwoman's doubly subversive literary potential (subversive because she is mad and because she is a woman) proved very attractive to other feminist critics." In the nineteenth century, a number of women were suffering from mental ailments like nervous breakdowns, hysteria and post-natal depression. Being hysteric or developing a nervous condition became so common that these ailments came to be equated with women. As a result, they were either confined to asylums or forced to lead a domestic life in order to avoid any 'excitement' of their minds. Juliet Mitchell understands hysteria as "the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do both to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse." When Gilman was writing, America was heavily influenced by these Victorian values. Her works can be read as a form of resistance against these oppressive ideological systems of morality.

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics, Vol. 44, No. 1, Spring 2021 [196-203]

"The Yellow Wallpaper," published in 1892, is a first-person narrative in the form of a series of journal entries by an unnamed woman protagonist. She and her husband John have retired to a colonial mansion in America for her treatment. She has acquired a "temporary nervous depression" post-childbirth, which we now know as 'postpartum depression.' In the house, instead of a room that she likes better, she is confined mostly to a nursery upstairs with bars for windows and a filthy yellow wallpaper that holds her attention till the end of the story. The story traces her gradual spiralling from a "slight hysterical tendency" to a woman who completely loses her grasp on reality by the end.

Pratibha Ray's stories are set in the late twentieth-century Odisha. It was a crucial time for the flourishing of women's writing, may it be novels, short stories, poems or nonfiction works. Post-independence, the 1970s and 80s saw an unprecedented rise in feminist works in Odisha. Many of these works turned inwards and explored the female psyche and the inner lives of women. While these women writers were influenced by the feminist movements in the West as well as the movements close to home, their works were informed by a culture that was unique to their experience. These writings were bold, more vocal about gender issues than the earlier writings of the century, and aimed to bring about social change.

"The Eyes" (Originally published in 1980 as "Akhi" in Odia) is a third-person narrative account of a woman named Vimla. It is narrated by a teacher doing his research on psychologically afflicted patients. She is a patient at an asylum in Odisha, and her eyes, "from behind the railing" arrest the narrator whenever he enters the asylum. Vimla has been admitted to the hospital by her husband for erratic behaviour, and her son Raju has run away from home to wait outside the asylum for his mother, who he claims 'is not mad.' By her own admission, Vimla is not mad, but that it's only a pretence to escape the "maniacal torture" she faced at the hands of her husband.

Both stories, though written almost a century apart and situated in different socio-cultural contexts, work around certain similar themes. This paper focuses on the ways in which 'madness' has been used by these two authors to highlight concerns unique to their particular settings as well as issues that travel across borders and time periods. Resisting and rejecting the socially constructed definition of 'madness,' the two women protagonists seek freedom from the oppressive societal conventions that they at first conform to, but ultimately subvert, shocking and startling everyone around them, especially the upholders and perpetrators of these laws. They are constrained physically, emotionally as well as intellectually. Yet both of them feel a strain of unrest within themselves regarding their incomplete lives. Neither is a passive, unthinking recipient of her situation even at the beginning of the stories. The fact that there is an awareness of something not being right itself speaks volumes. That is the first step of liberation; an acknowledgement of the problem for being able to resolve it.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman suffered from postpartum depression, a mental condition that was not properly understood as an illness at the time. The popular remedy then was the "rest-cure treatment," which she found to be ineffective, contrary to what she believed to be the cure: autonomy and 'mental stimulation.' She sent a copy of her story that was inspired by this incident, to the doctor who treated her, Dr Silas Weir Mitchell, for perhaps showing the treatment's futility. Dr Mitchell had advised her to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as I lived." This translated to complete avoidance of intellectual stimulation like writing or any creative endeavours, thus stifling self-expression. Similarly, the protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" remarks, "[I] am

absolutely forbidden to 'work' until I am well again. Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good." Compartmentalization of 'male reason' and 'female fancy' seems to be at the foundation of this treatment. Showalter uses the term "domestication of insanity," indicating a relation of madness with domestic confinement. The rest-cure treatment proves to be futile and 'counterproductive' as it ends up making the narrator's condition worse. While she may have been a fictional or quasi-autobiographical character, such harmful treatments constituted the reality of many women. In her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935), Gilman calls her condition an "unbearable inner misery" along with "ceaseless tears."

In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the in-laws, represented by John's sister, check the unnamed narrator's behaviour at regular intervals by validating appropriate behaviour expected from a woman. She dismisses her 'fancy' for journal writing, much like John does, and then herself comes across as an ideal woman, the "angel in the house," as Gilbert and Gubar would say. She is placed in juxtaposition to the 'sick' narrator who is restricted to a room in the house. The sister is the natural descendent of patriarchy, valorising its definitions of womanhood and appropriating other women to fit into the moulds created by their male 'overlords.' A distracted reader might miss the subtle hints from the very beginning about the emotional unavailability and dismissive nature of the husband, John. He is an oppressor who infantilizes his wife and is so discreet in his manner that to an outsider, he would look like a loving husband, spoiling his wife, and calling her endearing names. But what he actually is, is a cold, rational, calculating, practical doctor of mental illnesses, committed to his profession alone; a man of the world. Being her husband as well as her doctor, John makes it more difficult for her to question him. "He combines the diagnostic language of the physician… with the paternalistic language of the husband to create a formidable array of controls over her behavior" (Triechler). Her brother too is a doctor and supports John's method of treatment. John constantly denies her wish to move to another place where she would heal better. Her own views about her illness are dismissed as fancies and seen as a result of her overthinking. He practically forbids her from thinking at all, or worse, writing! Such restrictions show the deep-seated belief that a woman's thoughts are mere instincts, and a husband thus gets the upper hand. Everything she does is defined by what "John says." He puts himself in a position where he alone can protect his delicate and sick wife. Maysoon Taher Muhi makes an interesting observation in her critical essay. She rightly remarks, "it can be said that the husband defines what sanity to his wife is, and what his wife feels and thinks as insanity." The norm has been defined by men, and if an individual deviates from it, it leads to alienation and ostracization.

"The Eyes" was published at a time when conversations about domestic violence, dowry and equal rights among other gender concerns were taking place in India. In this story, a more explicitly violent male figure is presented. He subjects Vimla to both physical and psychological oppression. It's not difficult to find fault with the oppressor in this story. On being asked about his father, Raju gets startled and takes a minute before "he felt reassured that his father was not actually present." It indicates the trauma and its memory that still torments the child. Not to mention the mental trauma of such a childhood, which would give way to him having a troubled mental state in the future. It is only imaginable how much the wife would have had to bear the brunt of his rage, both on her part and on the behalf of her child. There is a graphic description of the violence Vimla has been a victim of. Raju recalls, "He would beat her till he drew blood. If we started to

cry, he would drag us out of our beds and beat us… To save us from thrashing, Mother would stand and face him like a war goddess." The husband calls her names like "you bitch, you whore," which shockingly is naturalized to an extent in innumerable homes in Indian society along with facing physical abuse at the hands of the in-laws. Vimla gradually loses her physical strength and starts spiralling into mental ailments. It is somewhat unclear as to what extent she is actually ill. But it can't be overlooked that feigning to be psychologically afflicted indicates a more terrifying condition.

Vimla tells her story to the narrator and she claims to be sane, and that it's only an act to escape "the hell" at home, highlighting the bleakness of the situation. She questions who can really be called 'mad.' She asks, "Do you think I was ever insane? There aren't any insane people inside this hospital. It is those on the other side that are deranged and diseased… We can die for love just as we can kill for hatred. While you people are just the opposite." She remarks that the people outside who are pretending to be sad when they are actually happy and the people who are making false promises out of greed and malicious intent, are the ones in real need of help. Her ideas remind one of Manto's "Toba Tek Singh," where the protagonist questions the boundaries and definitions of madness.[1] She declares that none of the inmates is actually mad, rather they are genuine in their laughter, sadness and hatred, unlike the outsiders.

Both forms of violence, physical and psychological, leave an indelible mark on the minds of the women in a different yet similar way. Both are victims. Both, to use the Freudian term, give way to 'repression.'[2] Both then face the consequences of it. While one actually faces a worsening effect on an already existing mental illness, another reacts and lashes out in quite a different way. Vimla's mind devises a method to escape the oppression in an unconventional way, but something that would easily go unsuspected by society. Society readily believes women to be prone to mental illnesses such as hysteria and nervous breakdowns, while ironically, it fails to understand the causes behind it. Hélène Cixous notes that hysteria is "the nuclear example of women's power to protest." She goes on to say that "The hysteric is, to my eyes, the typical woman in all her force."

The point of departure here is that, unlike "The Yellow Wallpaper," where there are no confidants for the woman other than her journal, in "The Eyes," the figure of a caring son, Raju, a companion to the protagonist, gives a strong sense of emotional support to Vimla. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," all the male characters, including the woman's husband and brother perpetuate male hegemony. While in "The Eyes," the son breaks the chain of ruthless men and stands as a light of hope for a generation of men with a more profound understanding of women's inner worlds. One can also extend this reading to say that Raju is the reason why Vimla's feet are still grounded in reality and she hasn't become completely 'insane.' But sadly, it's insufficient. Even this bond is shaken by the taunts of society, "naturally, if the mother is crazy, how can the son be normal?" So, now the only fear she has is that Raju might also be forcefully admitted to the asylum.

The medical authorities at the asylum validate the healing effects that the care and understanding of loved ones can accomplish on a psychologically afflicted person, but Vimla's husband, they tell the narrator, hadn't "cooperated even a little bit." So, there was very little hope of recovery for this "madwoman" and others like her at the asylum. Like Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Bronte and *The Madwoman in the Attic*, by Gilbert and Gubar, many such women are locked up and have no other way of expressing than displaying rage, breaking things, or as in the case of Bertha, burning the house down.[3] The woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" does something similar. She too doesn't find a friendly ear in John, and ultimately stops attempting to communicate. She even

goes a step further in claiming that perhaps he is the "reason I do not get well faster." J. Wolter notes, the protagonist "begins to decode the pattern (of her husband and his world), destroys it, and constructs a reading and a world of her own." Finally, in a maddening rage, she tears off the yellow wallpaper, behind which she imagines numerous women like her are trapped.

The use of metaphors and symbolism is abundant in both stories. Both have central metaphors that run throughout the stories. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the woman's "changing reactions to the wallpaper" indicate the stages of her illness. The wallpaper stands most significantly for its representation of patriarchy. Like patriarchy, it has imprisoned thousands of women over the centuries. The protagonist visualises these trapped women and tries to liberate them by peeling off the wallpaper. She increasingly identifies herself with the 'creeping' women who are oppressed by societal restrictions and with the woman in the wallpaper. Towards the end of the story, it seems that she becomes one with her. In "The Eyes," the complaints of women are reflected in the description of the eyes of Vimla. These eyes are like lips that possess the ability to speak of the oppression they have seen and faced. There are "complaints in those eyes." They are "burning" and "smouldering, harsh eyes." They are also "pleading eyes," that seek help for liberation.

The "youthful dreams" ("The Eyes") and the illusion of a happy married life that both the women protagonists had, is shattered post-marriage. While the unnamed narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" has her dreams of an ideal, understanding husband unfulfilled, Vimla on the other hand, also has physical dimensions to her suffering. She feels like "a beast of burden" who has to work without complaining, eating only the bare minimum for survival, which makes the class difference between the two women evident. Her 'insanity' began when she concocted the idea that "if my hands got burnt, I could get some rest. I thrust my hands into the burning coals and lost consciousness." She's doubly oppressed; being a woman, she is oppressed by her husband, and being a victim of poverty, which brings its own struggles for her, she additionally has to face the ire of a frustrated husband.

The class difference also becomes evident in the description of the respective husbands and the family structure. It might also be attributed to a difference in cultural backgrounds. The fact that John is a physician is an integral part of the story. On the other hand, Vimla's husband's profession isn't mentioned and neither does it seem to be significant. It suffices to know that whatever little income he has, he uses to exploit his "evil habits" like drinking. Vimla also has a meagre income which she saves for her children, but that too gets snatched. She has four children to feed. Her body is put through an undesirable number of births, while all she wanted was a small family, which would also have been capable of maintaining financial stability. When she became aware of a fifth child, she "attacked him (her husband), pummelling and pinching his face." She has been in and out of the asylum since then.

The idea of motherhood is the other aspect of marriage that has been explored in different ways in the two stories. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the new mother is hardly ever shown engaging with the child, which doesn't mean she's apathetic towards it. The child is mostly kept away from the mother, by the caretaker, which actually was the case in most houses in America in the nineteenth century. For instance, the protagonist of Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" loves her child, but does not get to spend as much time together as she would like, because of other matters she has to attend to.[4] On the other hand, such a situation was unimaginable in twentieth-century India or even today. The

ideals of motherhood that consist of unconditional love and sacrifice are more strictly adhered to. Vimla truly loves her son, protects him from his abusive father and also opens up to him about her dreams. Raju reminiscences, "mother would hold me tight and sob through the night." She wants to make him "a great man," who would be the new ideal man, not butch, violent, cold, and rational, but tender, learned, and one who can "discriminate between good and bad, justice and injustice." No such alternative design for man is provided in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

The ending of both stories is bleak. They end with uncertainty regarding the fate of the characters. "The Yellow Wallpaper" closes with the woman 'creeping' around the room and over her unconscious husband, while in "The Eyes," Vimla has no escape. Ray delves into the lives of the asylum patients and sees the unbreakable chain, where once a woman becomes a patient, there's no returning to normalcy or acceptance by society. The "hospital staff found it impossible to exercise control over her." But is it really a place where she is truly free? In some aspects, she might be, but she may never lead the life she had envisioned for herself and her children. Vimla will forever be stuck at either her house, where she would never be happy nor would society accept her as 'normal' or at the asylum where she doesn't truly belong. She is caught in the vicious circle of an endless journeying back and forth. To add to the bleakness of the situation, her son is admitted to the asylum for attempted violence with his father, who at the end, walks away 'unconcerned.' Helen Small's observation here about Gilman's protagonist, can also be applied to understand Vimla's dilemma, "she [the protagonist(s)] sees the complexity of her situation, but is in no position to do anything about it (except escape it by retreating into herself, by going mad). This reading of the story's end is neither positive nor negative, but ambivalent. 'Madness' is an escape from one kind of cage into another."

"The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out," observes the unnamed protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper." The mode of 'shaking' the pattern of oppression could differ in each woman's situation. The protagonist secretly writes in her journal and the woman trapped behind the wallpaper tries to free herself just as Gilman questions the norms and codes of conduct enforced on women through her writing. By writing and voicing her concerns, she also encourages women readers to question the ways in which they themselves are bound. Women's writing in this respect becomes all the more significant. It presents a perspective that was absent in the male author's representation of women. Unique and unexpected viewpoints come to the fore when women start writing and unfolding their own experiences. It has the ability to shock readers by defying their usual expectations of form and content from a piece of literature, while also exposing a whole new way of viewing reality. Writing, thus, becomes a potent mode of expression for women.

The point where both Ray and Gilman would join hands is the reason why they write. Both confess to being harbingers of social change. Ray stresses the dire need for action through Vimla, who tells the narrator how he can only write an article about her story or give a talk on it that would bring applause, but that won't actually solve her problem. This is a social problem that needs more thought and effective solutions than sympathy. Similarly, Gilman too gave precedence to the importance of social change and divorced her husband who wasn't supportive of her cause. She removed all such obstacles that stopped her from accomplishing this goal.

Gilman, elsewhere, has also shown her distrust in the institution of marriage, whereas Ray doesn't shun the practice per se, but highlights the problems within it and hopes for

them to be remedied. Gilman's other works like *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home* (1904), and *Human Work* (1904) investigate the position of women at home, who are forced to lead a domesticated life, serving their families as wives and mothers and denied any outlet for their intellect and creativity. In such circumstances, many female authors often employ the trope of madness for expression. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar observe that "by projecting their rebellious impulses… into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them. What this means, however, is that the madwoman in literature by women is… an image of her (the author's) own anxiety and rage… so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be."

The two writers take up the issue of women's writing. Women see writing as a mode of expression, freedom, vocalization of issues, or simply look for a confidant in their diaries and journals. As opposed to the rationality of men, women find an instinctive connection with nature and the mystical and they draw strength from them. Men seem to be threatened by all these aspects and try to restrict women, like Gilman's husband and John in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Luce Irigaray remarks, "[women's] words are never heard… serious scientific discourse and practice remain the privilege of men who have control of politics in general as well as of our most private sphere as women. Everywhere, in everything, men's speech, men's values, dreams and desires are the law. Everywhere and in everything, men define the function and the social role of women, right down to the sexual identity that women are to have or not to have. Men know, men have access to the truth, not us."

The protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" asserts, "I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!" The fact that she is nameless hints at the universality of women in similar situations who are forced to restrict their voice. Grace Farrell notes, "all female ailments… were connected to the female reproductive organs" and "it was suggested that women's greater participation in intellectual/ mental work would interfere with the proper growth of their reproductive system and thus, affect their 'primary' role as procreators." But actually, the exploration of subjectivity that comes with writing, empowers women to overthrow power structures. That is why Virginia Woolf talks about the necessity of having "A Room of One's Own." A woman must have a creative and literal space all to herself and have economic independence, which Woolf sees as essential in cultivating a feminine subjectivity.[5] Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898) also highlights the significance of women achieving financial independence. Not only will it benefit women, but it will also contribute to the growth of society as a whole. This would lead to more women like Gilman and Ray to write about their lives, and those of other women, and tell their untold stories to the world.

Women and women writers who resist, transgress, rebel and dare to defy the norm, always run the risk of being labelled as 'insane,' 'dangerous,' 'hysteric' or 'unnatural.' Being 'abnormal' sets them apart from the community and isolates them. Elaine Showalter observes in *The Female Malady* that "Biographies and letters of gifted women who suffered mental breakdowns have suggested that madness is the price women artists have had to pay for the exercise of their creativity in a male-dominated culture."

Madness, thus, becomes much more than a bodily and mental ailment. For a woman or a woman writer, madness can be an escape, a way of asserting self-identity, a medium of turning inwards to discover the true self or a trope to expose significant issues and realities.

It can provide the space to speak and act in a way that could not have been possible in a 'reality' forged by men and male authors. It may be worthwhile to ponder on psychiatrist Ronald Laing's statement that "madness need not be a breakdown; it may also be a breakthrough."

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Notes

[1] Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" (1955) employed the trope of madness to question the authorities and draw points of comparison between the inmates of the asylum and those residing on the outside.

[2] Freud used the term 'repression' as part of his psychoanalytic theory. It can be defined as "a thought, memory, or feeling [that] is too painful for an individual, so the person unconsciously pushes the information out of consciousness."

[3] Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is a significant read for feminist scholars, not just because of the protagonist Jane, but for the character of Bertha Mason, the 'mad' ex-wife of Rochester. Bertha Mason later became a subject of intensive study by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

[4] Mansfield, Katherine. *Bliss and Other Stories.* (Reprinted). Constable & Co., 1923. The protagonist Bertha Young lives in a polite society that places constraints on behaviour and defines codes of conduct. She experiences 'bliss' when she sees her baby, but she is prevented from closely nurturing and raising the child as it is supposed to be the Nurse's job.

[5] Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is a seminal work in feminist criticism. She makes the point that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."

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