

AN ENVELOPED RESILIENCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER* AND *THE AWAKENING*

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Abstract

The assertion of selfhood of women was a contested idea during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries irrespective of cultures and nations. This paper aims to map out those shadowy domains of feminine resistance to rigid structural norms. I find Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) are two such texts which step out of the contemporary Victorian comfort zone of patriarchal thought about women. These texts, though cannot be claimed as radical in their treatment of femininity, are sprinkled with newer ideas on female resistance to the *status quo*. The comparative study of these two texts aspires to reinvestigate the resilience of two female protagonists whom the contemporary late-Victorian criticism dismissed as deranged.

Keywords: resilience, feminine, hysteria, madness, discursive supremacy, circular, sea, paternal logic.

The idea of feminine resilience in the Victorian and late Victorian context was mostly clouded. The dominant ethical and ideological parameters simply equated femininity and its assertion with the negative side of the binary system. The middle class Victorian ideology comfortably made a clear distinction between a homely “angel” as the epitome of ideal femininity, and the subversive madwoman. Gradually the representation of madness from the feminine perspective in primary literary endeavours becomes one of the potent means of showcasing the different orientation of feminine sensibilities. However, it neither seeks to endorse clinically accurate notion of insanity nor is resilience established through literary madness only. In these early phases of a distinct feminine authorship, female protagonists were tentative in their approaches to register their subjectivity. Both the texts, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) take the readers through a series of bizarre events, to a definitive female resilience, destabilizing the discursive supremacy of paternal logic.

Gilman's protagonist, in the deeply disturbing short story, is supposedly suffering from neurasthenia. She is portrayed as hysteric in the way as etymologically hysteria alludes to be an exclusively feminine mental disorder. The shrewd politicization of the mental state of a human being is overlapped with the concept of female body. This devaluing overlapping led to the construction of women as the Other of men and stratified the societal gendered role of women.

These notions are vaguely surfaced by the nameless female protagonist undergoing rest-cure method of treatment. The namelessness of the narrator is somewhat analogous to Edna's being a static Mrs Pontellier in *The Awakening*. In Chopin's novel, with the aid of minute and vivid details, the narrative lays bare the deep existential void within the protagonist. In spite of making all the necessary sacrifices, even the name and identity as a human being, John's "blessed little goose" only digs open the unreality of becoming the epitome of man's idea of good wife (Gilman 44). Yet she cannot resist consciously the colonisation of her body and self. For Edna, Chopin delves deep into her heart to find out what destabilises her.

In both the texts, the female protagonists are disturbed by an ambivalent sense of confinement. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the anonymous narrator is locked both physically and psychologically. Undergoing the rest-cure method, she is locked in the nursery room and not allowed to do anything. It finally culminates into her eventual delirium. However for her doctor husband John, the process is supposed to have a recuperative value. To some extent, the anonymous narrator conforms to the norms propagated by patriarchy. Perhaps this is why she introduces John first in the beginning of her narration. Her identity is conditioned only by being his wife. She does not hesitate to translate her desires as mere whim (Gilman 45). In spite of all her desperate efforts to cling to her only identity as John's wife, the subconscious resistance grows wild. Her attempts to accept John's prescription to cure her mental illness actually brings about a reverse impact. On the other hand, Mrs Pontellier does not have a definitive idea of what really stifles her. Unlike the anonymous narrator, the mother of two children is not after all locked in a creepy nursery room. Kate Chopin here extends the socio-psychological aspects of being locked up. Both the protagonists, having a vague sense of being locked up in an ideological prison house, have to show resilience to combat the collective pressure of erasure.

John's wife and Mrs Pontellier respond to the situation in the ways that seem to be similar. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the narrator tries to write down her pent up feelings. But this feeble attempt to translate her feelings is censored by John. He thinks that this habit will only aggravate her mental illness. Moreover, the presence of her vigilant sister-in-law does not allow her to write down what she feels. The alienated individual identifies her derogatory status as a human being and the process of solitary elimination. Her passive adherence to John's rules and regulations subconsciously incites her to create a different version of reality. She seeks to create an alternate reality constructed by feminine ideas of sight, sound and smell that would resist the single-minded linearity of paternal reason. This process is provided a fillip with the presence of the crinkly wallpaper in her room. However the wallpaper cannot be homogeneously be taken as a symbol of her subversive self and emancipation. The observation of Karen Ford is especially significant here as she opines, "The wallpaper, in fact, sometimes appears like male discourse in its capacity to contradict and immobilize the women who are trapped within it" (311). However, the wallpaper with its menacing and destabilizing visibility can be seen as verbalizing endless possibilities of feminine discourse:

. . . Gauthier and others suggest another possibility, pointing to "blank pages, gaps, borders, spaces and silence, holes in discourse . . . the aspect of feminine writing which is the most difficult to verbalize because it becomes compromised, rationalized, masculinized as it explains itself . . . If the reader feels a bit disoriented in this new space, one which is obscure and silent, it proves perhaps that it is women's space" (164). If the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" in any sense discovers women's discourse, it exists in the blankness behind the wallpaper. (Ford 312)

Before the discussion of the means how the wallpaper becomes only refuge to register her subjectivity, it is necessary to understand her desire of writing. As she writes down or tries to do so, it becomes clearer how her lines of thought are buried under the supremacist text of her husband. She presents her subjective views in bracket, “John is a physician, and *perhaps* – (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, mind) – *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster” (Gilman 41). This is undoubtedly a mark of her resilience, though the attempt is surrounded by indecision. She can only confide to a “dead paper”, yet she is able to contradict to her learned physician husband. In *The Awakening*, Mrs Pontellier is trapped within a wrong marriage.

Edna’s husband Léonce Pontellier, in spite of being rational and logical, fails to understand her. With her relationship with Robert Lebrun, it seems primarily that her sole quest is for love. But as the narrative progresses, a plethora of complex issues blocks the linearity of her quest. Edna’s quest to a tentative approach towards selfhood is first surfaced as she talks to Adèle Ratignolle. The third person omniscient narration shows from the beginning that she is struck in a sort of midway, and she vaguely comprehends it, “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her [Edna’s] consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul’s summer day” (Chopin 8). She just cannot fit into the scheme of role fixation. She cannot be a home-spun Adèle Ratignolle though she appears to her as “faultless Madonna” (Chopin 11). In spite of her innate artistic sensibilities, she can never be like Mademoiselle Reisz – an ascetic artist. Due to this lack of a sort of single minded homogeneity, she feels a sense of comfort in the company of Robert, outside “. . . the abundance of her husband’s kindness” (Chopin 8). Perhaps Edna has been in search of a lingering lullaby of solitude which is pampered by the presence of Robert. This is illustrated in the episode when she goes to Chênrière with Robert. It almost evokes a timeless Eden-like scene and after a refreshing nap she says to Robert, “The whole island seems changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up, leaving only you and me as past relics” (Chopin 37). She seems to have an intense affinity towards drifting away into a lonely planet of somewhere else. It is a kind of psychic domain, most powerfully portrayed by the shimmering constellation of the major leitmotifs of the text, including the sea, the moonlight, her efforts as a painter, idea of solitude and love.

However Edna has to come back to Mr Pontellier as she is the mother of two kids. Motherhood, one of the most hallowed shibboleths of popular culture, becomes a constricting metaphor for both the female protagonists. In Gilman’s short story, the anonymous narrator is suffering from post-natal psychological complications. The later on goings in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is shaped up by this complication and also John’s effort to cure her by locking her in the appalling nursery room. John’s perceptions about feminine subjectivity are almost echoed in Doctor Mandelet’s observations as the later tells Mr Pontellier, “. . . let your wife alone for a while. . . Woman, my dear friend’ is a very peculiar and delicate organism . . . most women are moody and whimsical” (Chopin 64). Within this kind of ideological prison, subject-constitution for the women becomes an ambivalent process. Edna cannot fully conform to being Madame Ratignolle, nor is she able to be Reisz. She wants to experience her own version of artistic self, enjoy a hard-earned freedom outside Léonce’s extravagant household, and the narration deftly captures her languid version of emancipation, “She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (Chopin 27). She strives to understand herself, “. . . to determine what character of a woman I [Edna] am; for candidly I don’t know” (Chopin 79). Her reality of being the wife of Mr Pontellier and consequently the mother of his children is potentially a sad dream

and her quest is for waking up from that sordid dream – a psychic “awakening”. The anonymous narrator too needs only paper and pen to write down the feelings of her repressed self. Both of them are dissuaded from experiencing their true selves; John’s wife is coerced directly and for Edna coercion comes filtered through the patriarchal agency.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator endeavours to recreate an alternate world of sight, sound and smell. She invests the wallpaper with life, “This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!” (Gilman 46) She thus defies following her husband’s text. Like the multi-layered pattern of the wallpaper her version of text turns out to be heteroglossic in the endless possibilities of ascribing female self. Like Edna, she too feels the pull of contradictory impulses as she says, “I’m getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because* of the wallpaper” (Gilman 48). She engages herself to find out the intricate pattern of the wallpaper and thereby adding a new dimension to her otherwise pointless existence. If Mrs Pontellier’s resilience is filtered through her artistic vocation, the anonymous narrator’s ventures are no less than a striving author. She is trying to find out what or who inhabits the wallpaper. Gradually the creeping figure of a skulking woman is discovered and “The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern just as she wanted to get out” (Gilman 50). The whole idea of binary thinking is called into question and the concept of logocentric supremacy is destabilised. Within the dense network of baffling images, envisioned by the narrator, it is very difficult to tag the woman in the wallpaper as her symbolic double. But the leitmotif – a woman trapped inside the crinkly wallpaper and creeps to come out of its bars, indeed symbolically alludes to the situation of the narrator. Her resilience lies in her abilities to trace her degree of erasure by patriarchal agents and scribbling down her own version of reality dominated by tactile, visual, and olfactory images. She thus dares to overstep her husband’s prescription, “. . . not to give way to fancy in the least” (Gilman 46). To rediscover her buried self, she needs to plunge into the imaginary world. She frantically tries to find out the pattern of the fungus infested paper, “Round and round and round – round and round and round – it makes me dizzy” (Gilman 55)! With this primeval chant-like repetition, the circularity of her text thwarts the linearity of paternal logic which is reflected in John’s eventual bewilderment and fainting. She tears the paper and liberates the woman which can be seen as her own metaphoric liberation. Her creeping over the patriarchal theorisation of female self, body, and hysteria appears as a definitive gesture of resilience.

The mysterious circularity that the nameless narrator speaks about is reflected also in the narrative pattern of *The Awakening*. The narrative starts in Grand Isle, moves through New Orleans, and ends where it began. The reference of the physical circularity is suggestive of a psychic cyclic pattern. Edna’s tentative efforts to discover her true self include her artistic vocation, her outright decision to live alone, her affairs with Robert and Alcée Arobin. Daniel Rankin finds Edna’s ventures and the novel as “. . . erotic in motivation” (183). Critics also find, “Mentally unbalanced, Edna provides an example of a psychosis with a direct bearing on her external life and behaviour” (Arnavon 186). Her every attempt to be herself is fettered by rigid societal norms. However, the urge for waking up from the sordid dream of her life remains vivid till the end. She thinks of earning her living by selling her paintings, even she thinks of moving out with Robert to start everything afresh. But her metaphoric wings turn out to be too weak to resist the collective social pressure. The climactic moment comes when her “mother surrogate” Madam Ratignolle reminds her duties towards the kids (Showalter 315). The suggestions of the fertile “Madonna” win over the dwarfish stature of the artist. Edna abandons her artistic self and her cherished life of love and freedom. The limitless possibilities of the soul can only be embraced by her sensuous companion, the sea. Her implied suicide at the end has variously been

criticised as a gesture of compromise. But such criticisms overlook Edna’s polyphonic rising to grasp the nature of her buried self. “She was an American woman, raised in the protestant mistrust of the senses and in the detestation of sexual desire as the root of evil” so through her implied nakedness she tramples the law of Presbyterianism (Ziff 196). Her nakedness can also be viewed as a symbolic rebirth and perhaps connotative of the idea that she can no longer be contained within the patronymic logic and reason. She indeed achieves her aim to swim to the region where no woman had swum before and the supposed suicidal swim is an act of resilience.

Thus both the female protagonists showcase resilience in their own ways. They literally live the shadowy arena where the ideological supremacy cannot penetrate, and hence tempts to tag their attempts as mere feminine insanity. Concerning the period and the volatile state of female discourse available then, these women’s crawling and supposed suicide to inscribe themselves can surely be read as marks of resilience – however doubted and enveloped they may appear.

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