

Stigmatisation of Mental Illness: Analysis of Women's Condition Through "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Newspaper Articles on Women

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Abstract

The present article explores the account of mental illness in the form of Nervous depression/postpartum depression in women through the analytical reading of the short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Illness or disease as a physical condition is clearly visible and easily diagnosed hence could be cured but the mental stigma that comes along with any such ailments, most of the time, is undiagnosed or ignored due to denial. Mental health is neglected especially when it comes to women. In the Victorian era, the treatment suggested for such ailments were mostly the 'rest cure', which made the person, suffering from the illness, to go to a place good in climatic conditions. This means travelling has been an unavoidable part of such cures. Several writers of the nineteenth century chose to write about their sufferings mostly about Tuberculosis or mental illness and searched for cure through travels along with medications. Their travels to distant places gave them some relief but certainly no permanent cure.

The present article, on one hand, suggests the importance of travel as one of the cures for such illness but on the other hand it discusses the difficulties of travel in the current Covid-19 situation and its impact on psyche. The present paper applies the psychoanalytic approach to study the mental condition of the woman protagonist in Gilman's story and also with the current condition of women dealing with the present Covid-19 era by reading some published newspaper articles on women issues.

Keywords: Mental Illness, Women, Psychoanalysis, Travel

Mental Illness and its Treatment in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Illness in all its forms is unpleasant, mental illness amongst them is the worst in terms of affliction it causes to the mind, affects the normal life and leaves the afflicted in a complete chaos for not being diagnosed or understood properly, most of the times. As per the WHO official website, 'women suffer the most with different kinds of mental illnesses' (WHO 2021). The literature from the ancient times to the contemporary times has also been a disturbing testimonial of it.

The current paper discusses the stigma attached with the mental illness in women and various reasons responsible for their condition. One of the first and foremost reasons is the patriarchal structure of the society where most of the women were/are still controlled by the men, and they are expected to behave in a certain way in certain conditions. For analysing it better, the first part of this paper takes the cue from the short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and studies the distress caused to women by the nervous and postpartum depression in particular and other factors causing/aggravating mental illness in general. The study is based on the Indian context, though the short story by Gilman, an American writer, is taken as an example. Her story acts as an archetype of the condition of women in all the societies hence aptly applies in the Indian context as well.

The second part of this study analyses two newspaper articles (online), published during the pandemic- Covid-19, which talks about the aggravated mental illness in women in these testing times. This paper tries to analyse the story *The Yellow Wallpaper* through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory and the two newspaper articles to know how did the pandemic affect women's mental condition; it also talks about the role travel plays in subduing mental illness, if not curing it completely. So, the paper discusses the role of travel in improving the condition of women in the past and most importantly in the present times as well.

In the nineteenth century, 'rest cure', by American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell was suggested for the treatment of hysteria, which included travels for changing air/environment as one of the treatments. But the rest cure had its own drawbacks when it was forced on the afflicted especially on women in such a way that they could not even do any other activity other than resting, like- reading, writing, or having a conversation with friends. Anne Stiles mentions in her paper, that the male patients of Mitchell were free to choose between 'rest cure' and 'west cure'. 'West cure' meant doing activities of their interest especially journeying to places, riding and hunting, to gain sanity- quite a misogynist approach by him. A few other writers like Virginia Woolf and Jane Addams were also forbidden from writing during their rest cure, that shows the inhuman treatment even of renowned women of their times (Stiles 2013). There could be no apt time than the present times to discuss about mental illness/disorder/health, where the whole world is going through a severe pandemic. It is also important to understand that instead of 'rest cure' 'travel cure' must be taken up as a part of the treatment. Travel which is now taken as a leisure activity, this paper proposes, is a crucial determinant to help de-stressing the traveler or the afflicted though with some limitations as well.

It is essential to discuss the term mental illness in women and its spectrum used in this paper before moving further with the discussion. As per the WHO website,

Gender differences occur particularly in the rates of common mental disorders- depression, anxiety and somatic complaints. These disorders in which women predominate, affect approximately 1 in 3 people in the community and constitute a serious public health problem...Depression is not only the most common women's mental health problem but may be more persistent in women than men (WHO 2021).

The scope of interpreting the story *The Yellow Wallpaper* in various ways opens up a vast horizon for the discussion on mental illness in women. This story by Gilman has often been

critiqued and contextualised within the framework of feminist analysis that opposed the patriarchal society and the male dominated medical field which neglected the mental condition of the women in the nineteenth century and is still not in an ideal state. But the current paper would like to discuss it through the lens of Psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. This text allows the readers to run a parallel reading and analysis, firstly of Jane's (the protagonist) complex mental condition and Gilman's (the writer) own psychological condition which prompted her to write the story. Secondly, the condition of women trapped in difficulties due to Covid-19. Barbara A. Suess in her paper, *The Writings on the Wall: Symbolic orders in The Yellow Wallpaper*, critiques the story through the standpoint of Lacanian psychoanalysis- as well as shatters the patriarchal biases done by either Lacan or any other theorists while analysing it (Suess 2003).

When Gilman vent out her personal experience through her counterpart Jane in the story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she speaks for all the women in the society who are hesitant and afraid of speaking for themselves. Here we shall try to probe into the position and stance of Gilman, her character Jane with the help of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory and also try to study what women had to suffer who bore the brunt in the worldwide pandemic COVID- 19 while suffering from mental illness due to their traditional roles in the society.

When we read the story, we find that it is due to the social stigma attached to mental ailments that makes people deal with it underhand. In the story John forbids Jane to talk or even think about her own mental condition. In spite of being a physician himself by profession, he denies Jane having any mental illness at all. For him it is just a 'temporary nervous depression- a slight hysterical tendency '(Gilman 648). The complete rejection of any kind of mental ailment for women is the result of serious patriarchal constraints and social stigma attached to such conditions. The stigma associated with the term 'mental illness 'is so strong in the society that while witnessing the symptoms of any kind of mental illness, generally the denial comes first, followed

by the efforts to suppress the feelings due to the fear of ‘what people might think’. Jane’s confession in her diary reveals John’s stance on her illness,

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression... a slight hysterical tendency... what is one to do? ...So, I take phosphates or phosphites whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again (Gilman 648).

She mostly thinks what her husband would feel and think of whatever she says, irrespective of her husband’s continuous neglect of her feelings. In spite of knowing well about what she exactly wants for herself, what would make her happy she follows John’s instructions, “Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do” (Gilman 648)?

Jane, in the story informs the readers about the measures she is taking to improve her condition or rather what her husband make her do to mitigate the severity of her mental state, which includes ‘Journeys ’or travelling to change ‘Air’. She mentions, “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus...I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition” (Gilman 648). The narrator while expressing her dissent with her husband shrinks after admitting the same, the nervous depression helps to shatter her inhibition to express, but she quickly rectifies it by blaming this audacity due to her mental condition. Seems that her mental condition dissuades her to remain in her safe cocoon rather it stirs her to move out of her shell even if for some time, where she stands against the societal norms, “But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way - it is such a relief” (Gilman 651)! The constraint of doing and saying nothing except sleeping and taking rest is burdening which Jane releases while writing in her diary, hiding from

everybody's searching eyes. John does not allow her to even write hence forbidding her from releasing her feelings when he himself also does not pay heed to her thoughts; this deprivation stigmatises her all the more. Her expressions are stopped at every point, for example when she says - " Better in body perhaps - " I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word" (Gilman 652).

It is the pattern on that yellow wallpaper of her room that gradually occupies her mind that soothes her for some time as she confesses it in her diary, "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was" (Gilman 653). This strange change, Jane feels when she makes peace with her situation and starts taking interest in reading the pattern, clearly shows that it is the safe place for her which came out of the result of the personal and social stigma she has faced, "He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind as if I couldn't see through him" (Gilman 655)!

The last bolt come to the readers when Jane completely gives in to her condition and speaks as if she herself is the women in the wallpaper, now she has escaped from that pattern and free to do what she likes. "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane? And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back" (Gilman 656)!

The Stigmatization of Mental Illness during the pandemic Covid-19

The concept of 'stigma', as quoted by Graham Thornicroft et al. in *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, is a combination of three related problems: a lack of knowledge (ignorance and misinformation); negative attitudes (prejudice); and excluding or avoiding behaviours (discrimination). This is seen in general irrespective of any gender, but women suffer the most as they are considered to be the backbone of a family; they run the house by managing various chores, taking care of kids and doing all such things while working professionally as well. Having so many

responsibilities on their shoulders they are the ones standing amidst the toughest situation in this recent pandemic- Covid-19. For having a clear idea what women have undergone during these times, two online articles have taken here for the discussion; one is by Swarnima Bhattacharya, a public health professional and the founder of *Thea Care*, who writes in *The Times of India* (online), *What Covid-19 teaches us about women's mental health* (April 11, 2020). This article raises the question that why is it important to focus on women's health especially during this pandemic? There are many factors like social, cultural and economic, along with that they have child care responsibilities which are compulsory for them to fulfil whether they are working outside or not. All such pressures are on them with less space, freedom of economic security. Such factors are responsible for women's deteriorated mental illness, those who have faced it first time during Covid-19 and also those who had already been suffering from anxiety and depression and could not be treated due to various reasons in such difficult times. The pandemic has made several people leave their jobs for health reasons, many were laid off and the number of women was more than the men. Other factors whether emotional or physical takes a toll on women's mental health, the pandemic has made it manifold. According to the article, "a 2016 study from Columbia University shows that women who have lower income than male counterparts (when matched across age, education, industry, marital status and other factors) are twice more likely to be depressed and six times more likely to suffer from anxiety" (Bhattacharya).

In the second article, "*One year of Lockdown: Self-Care and Mental Health During a Pandemic*", published in *The Indian Express* (online), Dr. Aparna Joshi writes that, pandemic has intensified the existing social rifts by adversely affecting those who belong to the marginalised groups such as migrants, elderly, women survivors of violence, people with mental illness etc (March 2021).

This article discusses the current situation of women also how did they deal or dealing with the pandemic blues, what major difficulties they have to undergo as a result. Covid-19 has increased the need to seek psychological help for mental health all the more (Joshi).

Psychoanalysis of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the Women's Condition during Covid-19

Lacan mentions in his important work *The Insistence of the Letter* that, "the unconscious is structured like a language". He also mentions that, Language is central because in investigating the unconscious the analyst is always both using and examining language (Barry 106). Jane while writing her feelings in a diary, as if talking to a person, discloses the inner working of her mind. Lacan's distinction between the two realms- Imaginary and Symbolic also plays a crucial role in understanding her position as a woman who is dealing with mental illness, the Mirror stage from the Imaginary realm makes Jane identify herself as the woman trapped in the wallpaper and wants to get herself out of that. The Imaginary realm lies in where the subject behaves as a young child and does not identify herself/himself as a distinguished being which is established by the Symbolic order i.e., the father, it is John in the story. The inner workings of Jane's mind do not match with the symbolic order and dwells in her mirror- stage, where she is treated and addressed as a child by her husband, "What is it, little girl?", "Bless her little heart?", "a blessed little goose." The frustration arising out of this treatment from her husband brings her to the stage where she, in order to revolt against patriarchy, connects with the wallpaper and gradually identifies with the woman trapped in it. In an effort to shatter the Symbolic order she tears away the wallpaper and rejects the domination of, what Peter Barry calls, 'patriarchal order and logic '(Barry 109).

The Covid-19 affected the people in every aspect, the online articles studied for this research reflects that the women whether housewives or those who leaves their house to work outside, has to confine themselves in the four walls of their houses like the others. The otherwise improved condition of working women went back to the primitive state where they could not travel and share their feelings with the other colleagues, rather their work got doubled- working from

home (if the nature of work is of that kind) made them look after their houses and kids also with their office work, or had to leave their jobs if the nature of their jobs does not support work from home. Such conditions put them in stress and this entrapment aggravated the mental illness of those already dealing with this stress. Several lost their loved ones and are facing severe depression and sense of loss. All the emotional blows like increased workload, loss of jobs, separation from family, physical abuses during quarantine escalate the stress especially in women which triggered the symptoms of several mental illnesses like depression, anxiety disorder or post traumatic disorder. More depressing is to face the stigma that they had to face, firstly due to the social distancing and secondly if they are already suffering from any kind of mental illnesses.

Travel as a Medium to Escape

The overall discussion proposes that whether it is Jane from *The Yellow Wallpaper* or the women who had to suffer during the pandemic, they need to be understood on the very first place. The support they need to get from their own family or from the society must be prompt. Stigmatising the illness or the ill women themselves blocks the chance of any improvement and leaves the person more depressed. It also suggests that travelling to a place with better surroundings provides a major relief to the depressed and helps to release their stress up to some level though there is no major research which could prove this. But the detailed analysis of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and of the women trapped in their homes during pandemic gives this indication. As this nineteenth century story gives the background of rest cure, prevalent in that time, it further gives a point for discussion to see travel as a medium of releasing depression and stress.

The pandemic has also taught us the value of going out, moving freely and visiting places for our recreation, so there could be no better times to realise the importance of travel as a part of treatment for mental illness as well. Travel might act as a window to escape from the clutches of the pressures coming from the stigma of mental illness. The effects of lockdown in the country

starting from March 2019 forced all to self- quarantine, so the women both working at home and working from home were locked up with increased domestic responsibilities, this situation gave rise to various social, cultural and financial issues. The compulsion of working at home without any activity outside along with increased burden of taking care of family members and school going children and for working women, the necessity of working from home made their lives more difficult. Though this paper suggests travel as an added treatment yet due to the lack of any established theory about this method of cure, it has its limitations as well. A seriously mentally ill person needs to take less stress which sometimes increases while travelling when some unplanned or unfamiliar things occurs, that could aggravate their illness. So, travel therapy must be taken as a recreational treatment with the advice of the doctor, and making it more normal with the empathic behaviour towards the ill, it might help in reducing the stigma attached with the illness.

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