

Feminist Writings
Professor Avishek Parui
Department of Humanities and Social Studies
Indian Institute of Technology Madras
The Yellow Wallpaper - Part 1

So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Feminists Writings. So, we are looking at Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story The Yellow Wallpaper. So, this will be the concluding lecture for that for this particular text. And we'll see how where we ended last time it was a very dramatic kind of a point where the protagonist, the female protagonist had locked herself in the room and had thrown the key away inside garden flow, Garden Road outside and then waited for the husband to come in.

And then we said, we have seen already how in a very symbolic act of emancipation and subversion she had taken off the wallpaper from the wall and then she discovered the woman behind the wallpaper and then you know there is degree of empathy that she is established with a woman figure in the wallpaper.

And we've seen how at a structural level as well as at a functional level, so how imprisonment or a lack of agency in terms of the wallpaper in terms of the medical apparatus in which she is confined in is very similar to the lack of agency suffered by the female figure in the wallpaper.

So when she takes off the wallpaper and symbolically emancipates the one figure from the patterns and the geometries that are there, she symbolically emancipates herself and then she locks herself in the room and she waits for the husband to come and then we are told in a very interesting sense and a very loaded verb that I wanted to astonish him.

So, astonish obviously over here it has a sense of retaliation, a sense of viscerality, a sense of violence about it and so she wants a hit back, she wants to retaliate a little bit, you know, and retaliate against all the sort of times in which she would have been present medically, existentially, psychologically by the husband figure.

(Refer Slide Time: 1:57)

I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes.
I want to astonish him.
I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!
But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on!
This bed will not move!
I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little



piece of one corner—but it hurt my teeth.
Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!
I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.



And then she goes on to say – ‘I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out and tries to get away I can tie her! But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on! This bed will not move! I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry but a bit off a little piece of one corner but it hurt my team.

So obviously this is getting very violent and visceral over here and violence and viscerality is part of subversion package, is part of the subversion narrative that she is enacting over here.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:26)

piece of one corner—but it hurt my teeth.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.



Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths that just shriek with derision! So we see how all the different inanimate things are now animated over here, and now animated at a violent level.

So she could see all the patterns and the strangle heads and bulbous eyes, almost like little chopped off heads that she talks about over here. So obviously things get very violent and gory, in a very visceral sense and then that makes her, that that makes entire subversion narrative, the entire subversion act a very, very visceral and violent act.

And then she says – ‘How all those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision! So derision obviously is just this mockery and anger that she has been subjected to over here, and that's something which is making her even more angry and then she says quite clearly over here.

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. So she wants to enact agency over here and we can see how the idea the aspiration to enact agency comes to a very visceral and violent process.

She wants to do it dramatically, she wants to do it in a very theatrical way and she wants to do it a very larger-than-life sense. She wants to jump from that and do something spectacular,

so there's a spectacular quality, there's a, you know, difference in degree in terms of what she wants to do and that is making her, you know, see the anger and at the same this anger is part of the subversion narrative, the subversion sentiment that she is experiencing at the moment.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:08)

Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

I don't like to look out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don't get me out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to



Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued. So she is stepping back from jumping from the window, she thinks she is improper and might be misconstrued, might be misunderstood. I don't like to look out of the windows even there are so many of those creeping woman and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of the wallpaper as I did? Right? So you know the whole idea now begins to morphs, so she morphs into the wallpaper and she says the fact that I peeled off the wallpaper from the wall, maybe I realized that I was in the wallpaper as well, so I was in the yellow wallpaper.

So I was in this imprisonment, this prison of medical manners, this prison of medical collusion, this prison of this collusion between medical, science and patriarchy which had imprisoned me all the time. But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope you don't get me out in the road there! So, I'm securely fastened now by well-hidden rope you don't get me out in the road there.

So obviously she had a sense of rootedness now, she had a sense of anchorage road being tied to a rope and now she's trying herself and she is enacting her own agency in that fashion.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:14)

Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

I don't like to look out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don't get me out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to



get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the



I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard. It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please! So, the whole idea of as I please, become important over here and that becomes an agentic, the fact that she has agency to roam around the room as she pleases.

I don't want to go outside I want even if Jennie asks me to. For outside you have to creep on the ground and everything is green instead of yellow. But now she's having this affiliation to yellow, so as I mentioned already what we see psychologically and experientially throughout this the story is a movement from a version to affiliation, from a version to association.

So, now she associates herself with the yellow wallpaper and she says I want to be with this yellow wallpaper rather than getting out in the green outside which is something which I don't desire so much.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:06)

get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!
It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!
I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.
For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.
But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the



wall, so I cannot lose my way.
Why there's John at the door!
It is no use, young man, you can't open it!
How he does call and pound!
Now he's crying for an axe.
It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!
"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps,



But here I can creep smoothly on the floor and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall so I cannot lose my way. Why there's John at the door! It is no use, young man, you can't open it. How does he call and pound! Now he is crying for an axe. It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!

(Refer Slide Time: 6:24)

wall, so I cannot lose my way.
Why there's John at the door!
It is no use, young man, you can't open it!
How he does call and pound!
Now he's crying for an axe.
It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!
"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps,



under a plantain leaf!"
That silenced him for a few moments.
Then he said—very quietly indeed, "Open the door, my darling!"
"I can't," said I. "The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!"
And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door.



"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!" That silenced him for a few moments. So that is the place where she threw the key and now she is instructing him from the inside to get the key at that particular point because you know he's threatening to break the door with an axe and she doesn't want him to do that because she thinks it's a beautiful door.

So, now, what we see very clearly is in fact that she is the one who has control, she is the one who exercises control and she's the one who enacts and articulates control, and that makes agentic in quality compared to John.

And also what we see very clearly and very soon is that how the entire ontology an experientiality of hysteria will be shifted, it'll go to the male and the story would end with the man passing out, the great medical manly daughter passing out, you know, and becoming literally hysteric in quality where she becomes completely in control and completely rational in her own sense of rationality.

So, that silenced him for a few moments. Then he said very quietly indeed, "Open the door, my darling!" "I can't," said I. "The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!" And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it's so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door. So you know and that's something that there's a climax moment in the story.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:45)

"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing?"
I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.
"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!"
Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!



"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing?" I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. "I've got at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I have pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" So, you can see the whole idea is not morphing, mapping onto each other.

So she, essentially she was a yellow wallpaper and, you know, she kept looking at herself all the time with loath and disgust and now she manages to come out the yellow wallpaper and now she declares emancipation, she declares her freedom from the wallpaper and tells her husband quite clearly, "I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane.

And I have pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" So you know, I've come out of it, so you can't put me back. And in the final passage, the final paragraph in the story reads in the following way. Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my part by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!

So if you noticed it's very, very loaded, the last bit. John is referred to as that man, so you know that man that stranger, the person wanted to control me, the medical masculine person, why should that man have fainted? John faints in the end. So the entire notional hysteria is transferred back to the male over here.

So, why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall. So, you know, he fainted right across my path by the wall, so I had to creep over him every time. So, you know, she had to creep or step over him every time.

So, what we find at the end of the story is a complete reassertion of agency, and that reassertion of agency in that private rationality, that completely hysterisizes a male, so the great medical doctor who comes in, you know, having tried to confine and coerce and cure his wife for the longest time and now comes in and sees that she has taken on the wallpaper and she declares to him at that point that I've taken all the yellow wallpaper you can't put me back there again.

So the whole point becomes a very symbolic act of emancipation, self-emancipation, a very symbolic act of subversion whereby she liberates herself from the wallpaper and then that utter liberation, that assertion of liberation is what makes the husband pass out faint.

So and that concludes the story, of course. But then, you know, if you read it, if we go back and summarize what the story is all about, it's about a very alternative narrative of experience and that alternative narrative experience is something which situates the bits to serve against the medical narrative of control, coercion and cure which is obviously embodied by the husband figure over here.

And as I may have mentioned already there's a very clear allusion to Silas Weir Mitchell who is great American doctor, will prescribe what is now called a rest cure, so rest cure would include confining the figure, confining the hysteric more often and not the woman in a room or in a house and feeding her with some very regular food just so she puts on weight et cetera.

So it is obviously confinement to a large extent, and the specialty of this cure method is something which is very, very important because you know you can find that even throughout this course, by almost all the texts we have done so far, the fictional text, space has become a very important issue because, you know, space generates identity, especially in gender identities.

So the space which is, in which she is situated over here, it's very discursive space as medically and medical discursively informed space because that's where she's confined and contained and coerced and then, of course, at the end of the story, she manages to lock herself in a symbolic act of claiming the space to a large extent.

So she claims subspace that, in which she is situated and then, of course, she symbolically takes out the wallpaper, and the wallpaper becomes an allegory or a symbol of her own containment and imprisonment in a masculinist apparatus, as that becomes very important factor over here as well.

And that symbolic act of subversion becomes in a way a feminist critique of patriarchy, the feminist critique or the collusion between medicine and patriarchy, which is embodied by the husband figure over here, who happens to know everything, who happens to speak for the wife, speak for the suffering wife and speak and knows exactly what's good for her and what's not good for her and that figure of authority, that figure of certainty is something which is critiqued and almost parodied over here in this particular story.

So it's a very, very important feminist text, is a very important piece of feminist writing because it situates herself against the phallogocentric principle of cure and confinement, and coercion, and we find something such as, something so seemingly benevolent such as medical cure or medical treatment is actually quite discursive to the mind, so this discursive determination is something which is very, very important for us to understand and remember as we read the story.

And that in a way that Yellow Wallpaper becomes very symbolic space in which the female is confined and contained, especially the unhealthy females, so again sickness becomes a discursive formation over here. So, how sickness is described and mapped, how the sick body is something which is looked at and something which is gazed at, and that's something which you saw already in Sylvia Plath's poem Tulips which we have covered already.

So, this particular story the Yellow Wallpaper and Tulips are quite dialogic with each other in many ways because both are, both inhabit the protagonists and both takes inhabit the very important register of embodiment which is sort of alternative rationality, alternative involvement and which wants to situate herself against the discursive dominant order of embodiment which is obviously very, very phallogocentric in quality, which is very, very a male-centric in quality.

And this collusion like I said already, the collision with patriarchy and medicine which subjects the female protagonist to rest cure is something which is critiqued over here and parodied over here throughout the story. So that concludes the Yellow Wallpaper for us and we find and I'm sure you all understand how important the text is from perspective of Feminist Studies and how it connects to some of the concerns and debates we have been having generically about feminism and feminist writings.

About a reassertion of agency, about ownership on agency, ownership on the motor mechanism of agency and you know that's what happens in the end, of course, in motor mechanism of agency extends onto more existential frame of agency which is then, of course, reclaimed at the end of the story.

So that act of reclaiming is very, very important over here, and that reclaiming happens through a violent process, through a process of astonishment. So she wants to astonish the husband, it's almost giving him an electric shock. So the word astonish can mean different things over here at this point of time.

And, of course, we see at the end the husband does pass out as if she's been touched by a very, very high voltage electric object and he passes out and he becomes hysteric, he becomes someone who crumbles out of nervous exhaustion and then, of course, you know seemingly out of nervous exhaustion and then she says she has to creep over him every time.

That is a very open-ended kind of discussion, open-ended kind of conclusion, it is not really a conclusion because you don't quite know what happens to John, does he die or does he just faint or does he come back and I know reassert to agency, his agency and does she go back, the female protagonist, does she go back to the wallpaper.

So these are very, very open ended questions with which the story ends, to which we have no concrete answers. But the point is the open-endedness as part of the subversion package, the

fact that it doesn't really fit into any narrative of closure, it is something that's very, very important, it doesn't really have a closure in that sense.

It opens into multiple possibilities of meaning which is what, also at a very, very narrative level, it makes it a very, very strong feminist text. So with that we conclude *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's. Gilman and I hope you enjoyed reading it with me and so just go through all the important sessions which were covered so far in this particular series of lectures and you know I'm sure you will be able to find that how it fits into the broad narrative of feminism and feminist writings which were exploring in this course.

So, we conclude *The Yellow Wallpaper* with that and I move on to new text for the next lecture. Thank you for your attention.