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# Decoding the Thematic Imagery in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss"

Nidhi Angurala

M.Phil Scholar

English Department

Delhi University

New Delhi, India

nidhiangurala11@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper deploys the methodology of textual analysis to re-read and undertake an exegesis of the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and "Bliss" penned by modernist writer Katherine Mansfield. The exploration of the symbols and imagery that abound in the texts reveal and underscore the thematic framework of the short stories. While the colour, animal and food imagery add richness to the story of Bertha Mason in "Bliss", the multifarious symbols are symptomatic of the protagonist's mental make-up and the descent into madness of her creative propensity in "The Yellow Wallpaper".

Keywords: Bliss, Yellow wallpaper, Imagery, Theme, Symbols, Rest Cure.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" were published in late 19th century and early 20th century respectively and evince a nascent, tentative attempt to illustrate a female identity that transcends the traditional restrictive roles of

dutiful wife and mother designated for women in their contemporary epochs. While Gilman's protagonist's priority is not her new born baby, Mansfield's Bertha Young is not very involved with her baby's care either. The latter wonders whether she is "getting hysterical" (Mansfield 144) and the former is being treated for "nervous depression" and "slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman 2). However, the distinction lies in the focus of the two stories. While "The Yellow Wallpaper" appears to be critiquing the patriarchal nature of the domestic space and medical practises, "Bliss" explores the relationship of the protagonist, Bertha Mason, with her husband Harry and Pearl Fulton. It's interesting to note the presence of artistic energy in both the women. This paper will attempt to interpret the images in the stories that enhance the various themes present in them.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" begins with the image of a "colonial mansion" that is being rented by the couple. The protagonist calls it a "haunted house" (Gilman 2) which evokes the tradition of the gothic novel that was conventionally set in castles, abbeys and fortresses with dark lit corridors featuring supernatural elements, madness, eroticism and violence. However, unlike the gothic novels, the threat here is psychological rather than corporeal or external. The image provides an eerie and nightmarish ambience and also suggests a sense of confinement. It also points at the imaginative powers of the protagonist, the full extent of which will be seen when she becomes fixated with the yellow wallpaper later.

Her husband John, the readers are told, is a physician. It indicates his lack of specialisation and moreover aligns him with the medical practitioners of the period like Weir Mitchell who, as per the narrator, is like John and her brother "only more so" (Gilman 6). Anne Stiles, in her essay "The Rest Cure 1873-1925" notes that according to Weir Mitchell ``the 'rest-cure could be used to discipline women whose illness became a means of avoiding household duties." The rest cure,

however, only exacerbated the women's condition as it prohibited any physical or mental activity. Writers like Gilman and later Virginia Woolf were critical of this recuperative technique. The protagonist too feels that she would be better if she gets "less opposition and more society and stimulus" (Gilman 2).

The protagonist expresses doubts about her husband's expertise when she says," John is a physician, and PERHAPS--(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)--PERHAPS that is one reason I do not get well faster." The binary of "dead" and "living" is quite significant in the light of the rest cure which prescribed a death-in-life kind of existence. It evokes a sense of mistrust and isolation since the narrator cannot confide in living beings and therefore resorts to an inanimate confidante. While Bertha Young receives some amount of support from Pearl Fulton, Gilman's protagonist is alienated from the women in her life who are the Victorian "angels in the house" and have perhaps internalised patriarchal ideology. It is also interesting that the "dead paper" is giving her life by being a medium of self-expression whereas the living souls are gradually unknowingly taking it away, under the influence of patriarchy.

The frequent mention of the natural spaces contributes in making the room and mansion appear more like a prison. The description of the garden signifies freedom and contrasts with the barred nursery that is to be the patient's lot. The "delicious" and "large" (Gilman 2) garden only heightens the containment of the woman by matrimony and domesticity in general. Even though the room her husband chooses for her is "big, airy"(Gilman 3), the spaciousness of the room is offset by the sense of restriction that bars and rings evoke, as well as the "prescribed schedule", "immovable bed" that is nailed down, "barred windows" and "gate at the head of the stairs"(Gilman 4). The "atrocious nursery" (Gilman 4) not only reminds the woman of her own

failure to conform to the figure of a typical doting mother (her baby she later confesses makes her "nervous" (Gilman 4)) but it also highlights the childlike treatment of women by men. Her husband infantilizes her, carrying her to bed calling her "little goose" (Gilman 3) and trivialising her condition. The image of John laughing at her when she worries about the wallpaper is quite problematic as he seems to be condescending towards her most of the time and flippant about her "nervous troubles" which are "dreadfully depressing" (Gilman 4).

The sense of isolation of the protagonist is so severe that it aggravates her condition. It is also possible that she imagines the people on the lane she sees from her window, so intense is her need for companionship. However, John quite erroneously believes that society would be as lethal to her as fireworks in pillow cases (Gilman 5).

She remembers her childhood fondly and the freedom to exercise her wild imagination, manifesting in personifications like the knobs with a "kindly wink" and the chair that was the "strong friend" (Gilman 5). The remembrance contrasts against her present condition where everything is perceived as implicitly hostile and gives the impression of being a haunted house: "The floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster is dug out here and there and ... heavy bed ... looks as if it had been through the war"(Gilman 5). The domestic space instead of being a haven becomes a hostile, threatening space and unlike men women had no alternate space at their disposal.

The condition of the paper suggests a sense of ruin and neglect: "It is stripped off...in great patches all around the head of my bed..." and jars against the sensitive artistic instincts of the woman as the "sprawling flamboyant patterns (seem to be) committing every artistic sin" (Gilman 3). The description of the patterns suggests the idea of self-destruction as "The uncertain curves ... suddenly commit suicide... destroy themselves in unheard of angles…." (Gilman 3) and

this is later highlighted when Bertha brings a rope to tie the woman (her double). The pattern does not have any symmetry or repetition and is perhaps an external manifestation of her chaotic consciousness at the height of her illness when it is a "great effort" for her to "think straight" (Gilman 7). The colour is "repellent", "revolting" and an "unclean yellow" (Gilman 3) and reminds of her "old foul bad yellow things" (Gilman 10) later. It suggests sickness and decay and in conjunction with the barred room is possibly not very conducive to her recovery. The "broken neck" envisaged in the pattern continues the theme of suicide in the story whereas the "bulbous eyes" (Gilman 5) introduce the growth of the grotesque in her consciousness. The "broken neck" or "strangled heads" (Gilman 13) later could be the women who wish to escape their oppression but "nobody could climb out of that pattern-it strangles so" (Gilman 11). The attempt to break out of the bar is also thwarted as shall be seen later. The eyes might also imply a violation of privacy and the ceaseless scrutiny of the society that constantly judges the woman. It could also indicate her paranoia since she is writing in secret. She perhaps feels that she is under observation and must play the role of the good wife or mother. The eyes might also be referring to the eyes of the dead defiant women trying to break free but "the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down and makes their eyes white!" (Gilman 11).

The narrator mentions her "lack of strength" (Gilman 4) while writing which suggests a sense of lethargy and unnatural stupor brought on by the medicines plausibly. It is in stark contrast to the patient's own wish for stimulus and excitement. Her inability to fulfil her "duty" "weigh(s)" on her (Gilman 4). She is burdened by the expectation of society from a woman-maternal as well as conjugal. The figure of the bowed woman that she perceives in the wallpaper symbolises the multitude of women who are bent under the yoke of patriarchy. The protagonist describes John's sister as a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper" who "hopes for no better profession" (Gilman 5).

She is the perfect example of the angel in the house and her presence reminds the protagonist that there must be something wrong with her since she wishes to write and is moreover not so enthused by her domestic duties.

The mention of the moon renders the scene eerie and signifies lunacy. When she tries to talk to her husband at night instead of feelings of intimacy there is only a lack of understanding. John thinks he is improving when she is in fact getting worse. He is only concerned about her body and not her mind which is gradually getting worse under the husband's prescription. The woman seen in the wallpaper possibly mirrors the protagonist's mental state since the woman is "subdued" (Gilman 9) in the day when the protagonist sleeps. The woman and the "great many women" (Gilman 11) represent the women who wish to defy patriarchal dogmas and escape from the prison-like domestic space. Incidentally, Gilman herself left her husband to pursue a career in writing. The woman in the pattern tries to shake the bars and climb through the pattern, that is, escape the various restrictions and oppressions, but the pattern or patriarchy is too strong for them. The women are creeping around (Gilman 14), an exaggeration of the ideal subservient and obsequious attitude of women. By the end of the story the protagonist completely takes on the role of the creeping woman and thus says to John that "I've got out at last" out of the wallpaper (Gilman 14). She even starts liking everything she detested at first –the musty smell of the paper and yellow rather than green perhaps demonstrating the climax of her illness.

The story "Bliss" begins with a moment where "when she (Bertha) wanted to run instead of walk, to take dancing steps on and off the pavement, to bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air and catch it again, or to stand still and laugh at-nothing-at nothing, simply"(Mansfield 143). The images suggest a sense of lightness and buoyancy indicating the vitality and exuberance of the protagonist and a slight light-headedness which increases to a giddy hysteria later. Bertha

Mason is experiencing “absolute bliss” and she likens it to swallowing a piece of the “late afternoon sun” and it “burned in your bosom” (Mansfield 143). A sense of discomfort can be perceived here, as instead of warmth there is a sensation of burning. Her feelings seem to be too intense. It is possible that the fire within her could indicate a sexual awakening, probably arising due to her friendship with Pearl Fulton. Her exuberance is difficult to contain and she feels civilisation must be blamed for it. To shut up a body like a “rare, rare fiddle” (Mansfield 143) could point to the physical and sexual repression faced by women. Incidentally when she returns home, she throws off her coat because “she could not bear the tight clasp of it another moment” (Mansfield 143). The to and fro motion involved in the playing of the fiddle could also imply a lack of sexual fulfilment in Bertha’s life. Her sexual awakening occurs when she befriends Pearl Fulton and her virginity appears to be preserved despite giving birth to Little B. Even though Pearl Fulton too exudes certain coolness like Harry, intimacy with her, fans the “blazing fire of bliss within her” (Mansfield 150). She even wishes to symbolically bring her to their conjugal bed when she tells Harry that when they “are in bed tonight” she will tell him what “she and I have shared” (Mansfield 154). Bertha and Pearl are not only joined by Harry but also by gazing at the pear tree together. At that moment, it is compared with the flame of a candle, extending the trope of heat.

Her dining room- focal point of the domestic space- is “quite chilly “and juxtaposes with her own feverish body: “In her bosom...was that bright glowing place...” (Mansfield 144). The fruit bowl that Mary brings for her (Mansfield 144) mirrors her own domestic felicity. However, beneath the outward appearance everything is not quite right. An alternate reading of the fruits could be the sensuality that is found wanting in her marriage and also indicate her artistic

sensibilities as she matches the fruits with the colour of the furniture. The womb like shape of the fruit and the moistness within them also presents an erotic image.

The scene with Little B demonstrates her estrangement from her maternal side. She is not a stereotypical mother as she comes in at "another wrong moment" (Mansfield 144). Bertha feels immense love for her baby when her beautiful neck and toes are seen but she cannot find an outlet for these emotions: "she didn't know how to express it –what to do with it" (Mansfield 146).

There is a gap between appearances and reality as the tree appears beautiful and fertile but in reality, it is "non-functional" ( Nebeker 143). The sensuality and eroticism suggested by the two cats is not very appealing to Bertha, continuing the trope of her virginity despite her marriage and childbirth. She even appears wearing a white dress at the party. Later, the thought of being alone with Harry in the "dark room", "warm bed" jolts her. For "the first time in her life Bertha Young desired her husband" (Mansfield 154). It is possible that for her Harry becomes a medium to Pearl Fulton. Or that for the first time, she desires her husband because her desires have been kindled by Pearl and now, she can have a holistic relationship with Harry. The pretentious intellectual party is mocked in the form of Mrs Norman Knight's orange coat that has a procession of monkeys. She even "looks like a very intelligent monkey" wearing a dress of "banana skins" (Mansfield 148). The liaison between Harry and Pearl Fulton are united in their association with the colour silver: Pearl has tied her hair with a silver fillet (Mansfield 150) while Harry is shaking the silver box. (Mansfield 153).

In conclusion, it can be said that in "Bliss" the colour, animal and food imagery add richness to the story of Bertha Mason. Each image is pregnant with a deeper meaning which enhances the reader's understanding of the protagonist. Similarly, in "The Yellow Wallpaper the

various symbols are symptomatic of the protagonist's mental make-up and the descent into madness of her creative propensity.

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