

# A LIBERAL FEMINIST APPROACH TO CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

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## ABSTRACT

Patriarchal society gives legal rights and economic power to men so that women are subject to men and imprisoned in private sphere. When women who are given the role of a wife and mother begin to demand freedom and legal rights, the basis of feminism appears. This study applies liberal feminist approach to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) in order to analyse the gender roles in terms of patriarchal ideology of separate spheres. After giving birth to a baby, the narrator who is the main character at the same time is diagnosed with hysteria by her husband John who is a physician. She is also prescribed a 'rest cure' for three months in the attic of an isolated house. The 'rest cure' causes her obsession with the yellow wallpaper and slowly drives her mad due to the limitation of thinking and of raising the consciousness of female in private sphere. To be imprisoned in a room may have enormous risks of disappointment, madness, and suicide. In order to limit a woman's participation in the intellectual and public sphere, masculine science of nineteenth century's patriarchal society converts 'an angel in the house' into 'the madwoman in the attic' under the name of 'rest cure'. Gilman suggests that a woman can free herself if her financial conditions are radically changed through finally installing a dialectical movement between private sphere and public sphere.

**Keywords:** Liberal feminism, women's position, separate spheres, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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## Introduction

The roots of women's problems and women's rights have history of about two centuries. In this sense, for the phenomenon of feminism<sup>1</sup>, women's position has to be mentioned in the historical process. During pregnancy and child rearing periods, women are dependent on men in hunting communities (Lerner, 1986: 37). After human beings move from hunting to farming, motherhood becomes more than just a biological factor because being a family and owning a property attach importance. After human beings adopt a settled life, they keep women at home (Michel, 1993: 17, 18). In the context of private property, human beings leave women alone at home isolated from public sphere because they hold women responsible for homecare (Beauvoir, 1962: 17). As time passes, men consider women their own property and give them reproduction role. By making women weak, patriarchal society gives power to men (Rich, 1995: 67). Patriarchal society gives legal rights and economic power to men so that women are subject to men (French, 1983: 83). Women are convinced that through marriage they can take place in society.

In the Middle Ages, a married woman's economic existence belongs to her husband who also represents her legal entity (Cannon, 1999: 159). Women are forced to spend all their energy and time to domestic affairs (Mohl, 1933: 341). The ordinary woman is not expected to be intellectual, but to be a virgin or chaste when married (Gies, 1980: 64). In the Renaissance period, the woman is expected to do the housework and obey to her husband's authority (Michel, 1993: 45). In the seventeenth century, women are considered not to understand the complexities of public affairs because of weakness of intellect (Boulding, 1976: 561). In Age of Enlightenment, according to Isaac Newton, things that are irrational are secondary, insufficient, fanciful, unnamable and 'other' (Donovan, 1988: 3). Since men think that women lack intelligence, they believe they can rule women. As an important thinker of Age of Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau thinks that women cannot be guided by their own minds, so he gives women the role of family life, motherhood and childcare (1987: 446, 450). According to Immanuel Kant, women are not convenient for academic studies which require reasoning because women are timid and weak by nature, so women are in need of the protection of men (Schott, 1996: 474). In the eighteenth century, women's basic duties are to give birth and do domestic affairs in the traditional structure (Doğramacı, 1992: 106).<sup>2</sup> Women receive narrow education pursuing the purpose of marriage (Schreiner, 1911: 50). Adopting the role of a wife and mother, women's education includes only fulfilling her responsibilities for family and home (Barker, 2005: 37). Consequently, the education for women provides skills for domestic crafts, prudence, productivity, care and good governance.

In the nineteenth century, the concepts of marriage and family become the parts of the essential social institution. Women should be optimistic in all negative situations because they have to represent good morality and raise their children as virtuous individuals (Comte, 1853: 78). In the social hierarchy, there are separate spheres for men and women. Public sphere stands for rationality and men whereas private sphere represents sensuality, morality and women (İmançer, 2002: 153). Therefore, women are assumed as the angel at home (Peterson, 1984: 678). A woman who is imprisoned at private sphere is expected to improve spiritually and emotionally so that she can relieve her husband's stress in public sphere. In terms of traditional conception, young girls are convinced that marriage is the unquestionable purpose of their lives (Reed, 1975: 105). Mothers tell their daughters that they require male protection, that girls are submissive to boys, and to be affectionate. They tell their daughters that they need only beauty in order to find a husband. For this reason, patriarchal structure claims men's superiority over women as a natural right (Millett, 1970: 26). All kinds of rights are given to men whereas women are given duties such as housework and childcare.

Women are convinced that marriage is a means to maintain their social position and have a comfortable

<sup>1</sup> The feminist approach is retrieved from the book chapter by Alkan, Halit. "A Structuralist Analysis of Women's Position in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*." *Academic Studies in Philology-2019/2*. Ed. Zehra Göre. Cetinje: IVPE, 2019. 53-74. <http://www.uakb.org/2019-eylul-kitaplari> Accessed: 01.09.2021; and from the article by Alkan, Halit. "A Liberal Feminist Approach to Bobbie Ann Mason's *Shiloh*." *Euroasia Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 7.3 (2020): 99-109. Doi:doi.org/10.38064/eurssh.54

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from Turkish references were translated into English by the author of this study.

life (James, 1879: 52). Unfortunately, after marriage, women become the property of their husbands. A woman who commits adultery or is seduced is unquestioningly labelled as a fallen woman (Palmer, 1837, 1910: 7, 15). Patriarchal society enforces double standards to women in marriage because while men wander in public sphere, women are kept in private sphere, and while men are praised for some behaviour, women are accused for the same act (Asena, 2004: 96). Therefore, sexual ignorance for women and sexual privilege for men must end (Caine, 1997: 136). Since women are subject to men for food, their sexual intercourse turns to be an economic relationship, so marriage affects women's development in a negative way which prevents women's freedom and equality (Gilman, 1966: 5). Traits such as submissiveness and sexual passivity are imposed on and embraced by women (Greer, 1970: 15). Women are convinced to need the protection of men.

Women's position about marriage and profession related to separate spheres is reflected in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). In the short story, after giving birth to a baby, the narrator who is the main character at the same time is diagnosed with hysteria by her husband John who is a physician. She is also prescribed a 'rest cure' for three months in the attic of an isolated house. John forbids her the intellectual activity of writing and any companionship. The 'rest cure' causes her obsession with the yellow wallpaper and slowly drives her mad. This study applies liberal feminist approach to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* to analyse the gender roles in terms of patriarchal ideology of separate spheres.

### Method

When women begin to demand freedom and legal rights, the basis of feminism appears. Feminism refers to the women's liberation movement (Kayahan, 1999: 9). As a main branch of feminism, liberal feminism indicates women's freedom and equality with men (Çaha, 2003: 563). By determining the subjection women have experienced together with explaining their causes and consequences, feminist theories and approaches seek to find new policies and strategies for the emancipation of women (Tong, 2006: 9-20). Liberal feminism is based on equal opportunity in education, women's access to public sphere, and economic equality (Çakır, 2009: 438-446). Equal opportunity in education means that there is no difference in intellectual capacity between men and women. Without making any distinction, opportunities of equal education have to be provided for girls and boys (Arat, 1991: 36-79). Women can escape imprisonment in private sphere when they receive a good education, and can work in public sphere (Walters, 2005: 121-161). When women earn a living and gain power to determine their own lives, they can get rid of being dependent on men (Dikici, 2016: 525). In this context, women have the power and ability to stand on their own feet.

As liberal feminists Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill not only demand the rights of women but also argue the problems of women. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft considers women as a rational being and demands for women the education that improves the body and heart and develops conception (1988: 21). According to Wollstonecraft, gender discrimination can be ended by giving women the same education as men. In *The Enfranchisement of Women*, Harriet Taylor criticizes that women are deprived of professions and are forced to do their maternal duties as wives and mothers. Taylor states that the reason can be explained as "it is so because men want so" (1994: 192). Thus, women's dependence is not based on biological or physical reasons, but patriarchy. According to Taylor, women should receive education equally as men and be allowed to take role in the labour force. (Seiz and Pujol, 2000: 479). In *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill states that he wants to make certain full equality between women and men (Mill, 1869: 1). They emphasize that women should get equal opportunities in education and gain economic freedom by accessing in public sphere (Alkan, 2018: 37-8). Thereby, they claim equality in education, human rights and political process (Ramazanoğlu, 1998: 29). If this equality is achieved, women will gain their freedom.

Being a feminist writer between 1890 and 1930, Charlotte Perkins Gilman rejects domesticity known as the 'private sphere' because she believes that a change in social environment will effect a change in consciousness. "The feminist method is consciousness-raising: the collective critical reconstruction of the meaning of women's social experience as women live through it" (MacKinnon, 1989: 83). By creating awareness, feminism wants to change the misinterpreted image of women. "Women become feminists by becoming conscious of and criticising the power of symbolic misrepresentations of women" (Humm, 2013:

3). Gilman is considered an 'unnatural mother' because she sends her daughter to stay with her ex-husband and his new wife. Gilman faces the dilemma of being a mother and a writer. Mysterious nervous disorders that affect women's intellectual achievements prevail among women at that time:

Taken all together these illnesses . . . can be seen as a collective response to the changing shape of late nineteenth-century . . . in particular to the changing social positions and functions of women. Industrialisation had altered the nature of housework . . . leaving some women with leisure time to use their minds and others with a heightened commitment to motherhood as a perfectable science and the apotheosis of femininity. (Strouse, xv)

Gilman tries to create awareness about the condition of women in patriarchal society. "Too many of [Gilman's] own psychic struggles were over defining self, its boundaries never stable, the distinction between self-fulfilment and selfishness never clear" (Berkin, 1979: 167). Creating this awareness may help women struggle for improving their condition.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is about the internal dialogue of a woman diagnosed with hysteria and prescribed a 'rest cure'. However, the 'rest cure' slowly drives her mad, cutting her off from any intellectual pursuits. After the publication of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, William Dean Howells introduces it as "terrible and too wholly dire, [and] too terribly good to be printed" (Lane, 1981: xvii). However, Elaine Hedges reads it as a "feminist document [as] one of the rare pieces of literature we have by a nineteenth-century woman which directly confronts the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship" (1973: 37). A feminist perspective considers *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a destructive portrait of a woman trying to free herself from a traditional, depersonalizing marriage based on restrictive gender roles.

### **A Liberal Feminist Approach to *The Yellow Wallpaper***

After the narrator-main character gives birth to a baby, her husband John who is also a physician diagnoses her as "temporary nervous depression-slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman, 1990: 153). John prescribes a 'rest cure' for three months. The narrator's brother who is also a physician absolutely forbids her to work until she is well again. The narrator moves to an isolated house together with her husband and her sister-in-law Jennie who is the housekeeper. John gives instructions for every hour because he does not let her write and think. Despite John's prohibition of her intellectual activity of writing, she secretly continues to write: "I did write for a while in spite of them" (Gilman, 1990: 153). Patriarchal society expects women to be loyal, obedient and passive. This restraint means the limitation of not only thinking but also raising the consciousness of female. The narrator disagrees with this 'rest cure' and inactivity: "I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition" (Gilman, 1990: 153). This 'rest cure' represents the oppression and the imprisonment of women. The narrator does not object to John because women are expected to obey their husbands who know what is right in patriarchal society. At first, the narrator considers the wallpaper in her attic room aesthetically disgusting:

I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin . . . and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions. (Gilman, 1990: 154)

By portraying the wallpaper, she considers herself ugly, sinful, suicidal, and caught in the role of a wife. She thinks to have fallen into a sin by neglecting her maternal duties towards her baby because of her illness. Gilman shows the risks of unsympathetic isolation: "The protagonist has all too much of a room of her own . . . she is isolated within it, and made to think that any artistic or intellectual activity is worthless. Rather than nurturing her efforts, the room suffocates them" (Wagner-Martin, 1989: 61). The narrator does not let John's sister find her writing: "I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!" (Gilman, 1990: 156). Although the narrator does not have any advice about her work, she tries to exist by explaining herself through writing. The narrator says that John shall send her in the fall to Weir Mitchell who is just like John and her brother if she does not get well faster. *The Yellow Wallpaper* reflects Gilman's own experience after she is diagnosed as a hysteric and applied a 'rest cure' preventing her writing. Being an eminent physician in terms of neurasthenia, Silas Weir Mitchell cures Gilman's 'nervous breakdown'. In his *Wear and Tear, or Hints for the Overworked* (1871), Dr Mitchell states his philosophy

behind his advice on women's health including his disapprove of non-domestic activity by women (Notaro, 1999: 64). The objectives of Mitchell's therapy are as follows: "[The patient is] surfeited with it and welcomed a firm order to do the things she once felt she could not do [and introduced to the physician's] moral medication" (Lane, 1981: x). That is to say Mitchell's female patient trusts and depends on him for moral guidance and resigns herself to her role of a wife and a mother after getting through a therapy of 'rest cure' and restricted activity. There is a very clear similarity between Dr Mitchell and the physician John who is the narrator's husband in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Most of the health problems of women are believed to be caused by intellectual activity leading to "an afflux towards the brain of the blood which ought to flow towards the genital apparatus [and in the female cranium] the space destined to be filled with the brain is smaller" (Welter, 1976: 62, 58). In fact, women are not really weaker-minded or smaller-minded because "whosoever lives always in a small place and is always protected and restrained will become inevitably narrowed and weakened by it" (Brown, 1990: 277). In this sense, the woman is narrowed by the private sphere. The short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* is not only a protest against the rest cure but also a critique of patriarchal medicine. There is a link between the phenomenon of female insanity and the policy of social control in the Victorian period. The society perceives women as irrational and sexually unstable and renders them legally powerless and economically marginal:

[T]he medical belief that the instability of the female nervous and reproductive system made women more vulnerable to derangement than men had extensive consequences for social policy. It was used as a reason to keep women out of the professions . . . and to keep them under male control in the family and the state. Thus medical and political policies were mutually reinforcing. (Meyering, 1989: 56)

The narrator lives in the nursery at John's mercy. The narrator expresses the torture of her emotional life in her room where her obsession with the yellow wallpaper begins and ends in madness. The yellow wallpaper in the room symbolizes patriarchal society's cultural and social norms making the women plain, obedient and passive:

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean and the woman behind it is as plain as can be. I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman. By daylight, she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour. (Gilman, 1990: 160)

According to the quotation above, the narrator becomes aware of the oppression that keeps the woman passive and realizes the first step to freedom. The woman behind the bars symbolizes the condition of both the narrator and the women in the patriarchal society.

The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over. Then in the very bright spots, she keeps still, and in the very shady spots, she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard. And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern -it strangles so. (Gilman, 1990: 161)

Shaking the bars symbolizes the struggles of women under the oppression who question the cultural norms in patriarchal society. Despite the rooted basic norms of the society, the struggle has been started to break the norms. However, the narrator stays in the room, creeping with a rope around her waist. That is to say she has not destroyed the bars inherent in her own self which develop out of a sociocultural self-conditioning. She remains imprisoned in the room because she is psychologically crippled. For her, the invisible bars are too strong even to try to destroy them:

To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued... But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope-you don't get me out in the road there... It is so pleased to be out in this great room and creep around as I pleased! I don't want to go outside. (Gilman, 1990: 163)

In the end, the narrator tears off the wallpaper and tells her husband / physician John, "I've got out at last... in spite of you and Jane? And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman, 1990: 164). This quotation shows that the narrator succeeds in breaking the cultural norms of patriarchal society, and becomes conscious of her decision and freedom in spite of all the limitations and obstacles. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state about the narrator of this short story that she truly "escape[s] from her textual / architectural confinement" (1979: 91). "True Womanhood" has to include piety, purity, submissiveness, and especially domesticity which is the pillar of the society; however, a woman who

ignores the private sphere is labelled as "semi-women" or "mental hermaphrodites" (Welter, 1976: 21, 40). In this sense, women are not allowed to take part in the public sphere.

### Conclusion

In order to limit a woman's participation in the intellectual and public sphere and imprison her in private sphere, masculine science of nineteenth century's patriarchal society converts 'an angel in the house' into 'the madwoman in the attic' under the name of 'rest cure'. To be imprisoned in a room may have enormous risks of disappointment, madness, and suicide. Gilman raises awareness about women who are always misunderstood, ignored, suppressed, and labelled as mad. Revelation leads the narrator to believe that she has seen her new self in the woman creeping behind the pattern of the yellow wallpaper. Hence, Gilman suggests that a woman can free herself if her financial conditions are radically changed through finally installing a dialectical movement between private sphere and public sphere.

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# CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'IN *SARI DUVAR KAĞIDI* ESERİNE LIBERAL FEMİNİST BİR YAKLAŞIM

Halit Alkan

## Öz

Ataerkil toplum, kadınların erkeklere tabi olması ve özel alanda hapsedilmesi için sadece erkeklere yasal haklar ve ekonomik güç verir. Sadece eş ve anne rolü verilen kadınlar özgürlük ve yasal haklar talep etmeye başlayınca feminizmin temeli atılmış olur. Bu çalışma, liberal feminist yaklaşımını Charlotte Perkins Gilman'ın *Sarı Duvar Kağıdı* (1892) eserine uygulayarak ayrı alanların ataerkil ideolojisi açısından toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini analiz eder. Bir bebek dünyaya getirdikten sonra anlatıcıya-ana karaktere, doktor olan kocası John tarafından histeri teşhisi konur. Ayrıca kendisine izole edilmiş bir evin çatı katında üç ay süreyle bir 'yatak istirahati' reçete edilir. 'Yatak istirahati', onun sarı duvar kağıdı takıntısına neden olur ve düşünmenin sınırlılığı ve kadının özel alanda bilincini yükseltmesinin kısıtlanması nedeniyle onu yavaş yavaş delirtir. Bir odaya hapsolmek hayal kırıklığı, delilik ve intihar gibi çok büyük riskler taşır. On dokuzuncu yüzyılın ataerkil toplumunun eril bilimi, kadının entelektüel ve kamusal alana katılımını sınırlamak için 'evdeki meleş', 'yatak istirahati' adı altında 'tavan arasındaki deliye' dönüştürür. Gilman, bir kadının ancak yaşamının maddi koşulları kökten değiştirilirse ve özel alan ile kamusal alan arasında diyalektik bir hareket kurulursa kendini özgürleştirebileceğini öne sürer.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Liberal feminizm, kadının konumu, ayrı alanlar, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Sarı Duvar Kağıdı*