

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF LANGUAGE THROUGH A FEMINIST LENS: RE-READING CHARLOTTE PERKIN'S *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

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ABSTRACT

The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins has proven to be a feminist text with respect to the treatment of women through a male gaze. There are hundreds of studies that claim and prove that this short work of art diligently portrays the dilemma within the chaotic mind of a woman who is made to believe that she is 'sick'. This article attempts to examine the feminist perspective of reading the text. It also takes into consideration the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the language of this text that strengthens the claim. For doing so, the authors have taken into account two important writings by Luce Irigaray: "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" and "Women in the Market".

Keywords: feminist, gender, language, discourse, complex, subordination

INTRODUCTION

Before moving into analysing the texts, we would like to present the key ideas that were made by Luce Irigaray in these articles. In "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine", for example, one of the major ideas put forward by her is the gender biasness in language. Language becomes the pivotal point of her discussion. She breaks down the elements of language to show how it is a politically active place for understanding the role gender plays in shaping one's personality. Konstantin Gulish states, "...Irigaray argues for a specific style of feminine discourse and thinking that would differ significantly from the logo-centric male discourse." This paves the way for a gender-specific language that Irigaray advocates for, and an idea that is subtly implied by Charlotte Perkins in the text.

Towards the very beginning of the text, the unnamed female narrator says that the ‘...colonial mansion’ that she and her husband John rents for the summer is a ‘colonial mansion, a hereditary estate’. We would like to reflect on the words ‘colonial’ and ‘hereditary’ both of which represent a sense of masculinity in sound and structure. As post-colonial theorists Kirsten Hoist Petersen and Anna Rutherford use the term ‘doubly colonised’ to represent the subaltern state of a woman who is not only nationally colonised but is domestically colonised under a severe patriarchal society. The unnamed narrator consciously uses the term ‘colonial’ to give an idea of the structure of the building, yet she unconsciously points to the underlying problematic relationship that she shares not only with her husband but all men in her life. The usage of the term ‘hereditary’ too reinforces the argument. As we have read and re-read women’s plight during the time Charlotte Perkins was writing, it is clear that in her unconscious selection, the narrator unknowingly points to the logo-centric male discourses that women are made to locate themselves in.

Irigaray thus tries to locate a feminist discourse for women in an eccentric male-dominated society. She argues that within the threshold of a chauvinistic society, women are made to function only by adopting and adapting to the convenience of a language created and curated by men to their advantage. These arguments by Irigaray find evidence in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In the concept of the ‘other’ created by and for the unnamed narrator by the society towards the beginning of the narration, she says, “...my brother is also a physician and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.” In these lines she is trying to point to the reader that her husband John (who also happens to be a physician) has already branded her as ‘sick’ and to strengthen his ‘high’ claim, her own brother too seconds the idea.

These lines not only show the troubled condition of the woman in question but also show how her ideas are nullified by all-male decision-makers in her life. In fact, it also points to the fact that her role remains as ‘other’ and she has no way to justify or prove her point. The helplessness in her tone is evident throughout the text when most of the ideas that she portrays about herself is associated with a mention of her husband, John. She repeatedly points out that she is...forbidden to ‘work’, and most of her insecurities are simply ignored or nullified by the husband as absurd. The language that this woman develops is mostly the language of a subordinate. Nowhere in the text do we see her talking from the point of authority. Her husband’s claim that they went there ‘solely’ for her ‘account’ so that she gets enough ‘air’ and ‘rest’ is again a very absurd idea. The reader can immediately identify what is proven when she finally says, “...He knows there is no reason for people walking in these numerous paths suffer, and that satisfies him.”

The idea of ‘satisfaction’ in a male member takes us to Luce Irigaray’s second article called “Women on the Market” where she says, “...all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men’s business.” Thus, we see why John’s satisfaction is kept way ahead than the unnamed narrator’s. John, the husband or the brother represents the authority who can pawn women for just production. In fact, in forcing the narrator into not working and the idea of getting her rest is associated with a bigger and more complex idea of making sure that the woman recovers to give birth to a child, making us move back to the idea of maintaining a ‘hereditary’. The ‘socio-cultural endogamy’ that Luce Irigaray points too excludes women from participation and keeps them as mere commodities for the society. Luce Irigaray further says, “...Women-as-commodities are thus subject to a schism that divides them into the categories of usefulness and exchange value,” which is evident when John, the husband simply ignores the pleas of the narrator as ‘facies’.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article studies how language is a complex place of desire for women who are forced to act according to the whims and fancies of a male-dominated society. It also reflects on the fact that women are considered to be a body or commodity for the chauvinistic society and are considered to be easily replaceable. Moreover, it takes into account the complexities and ambiguities that are already in the language of this text that reinforces the claim. The authors have done so by critically examining the facets in two of the most important writings by Luce Irigaray: “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine” and “Women in the Market”.

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