

“The Yellow Wallpaper” And “A Room Of One’s Own”

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room of One’s Own’ portrays class and gender in American society. The authors convey similar themes of social limitations influencing the roles of females in a dominant male society. The purpose of the writings is to transmit the negative aspects of the society. The survival of females in the constrained society was difficult due to the imposed restrictions. The authors present flexible visions of reality by displaying the adversities of social constraints. The sex and gender system defining the roles of males and females is also known as the patriarchal system. The traditional and conventional aspects of the American culture denied females of equal rights, becoming most visible in the concept of freedom. The authors state that equal opportunities will improve the role of females, allowing them to perform constructive roles and attain happiness.

Gilman, in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, discusses discourse related to gender and sexuality during the early waves of feminism in America. The author deconstructs the notion of feminism in American culture. Gilman shares a complex understanding of gender and sexuality that embarks on the social position of women in America, which is also seen as a contemporary criticism of American society. She uncovers the conservatism prevailing in American culture, resulting in the devaluation of female talents. The limited role of females in the Western world resulted in repercussions for women. The challenging social structure deteriorated the lives of many females who failed to adjust to the constrained society. Gilman, in the fiction, mentions “that American men `have bred a race of women weak enough to be handed about like invalids; or mentally weak enough to pretend they are-and to like it” (Gilman, 19). The purpose of the social construct is to make women weaker than males. She also criticizes the economic system focusing on benefiting the males of society. The author also undermines the reality of the collected voice of women as it lacked any meaning in real life. The patriarchal system acts in favour of males by eliminating equal opportunities for females.

Gender subjugation remains a prominent theme in Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room of One’s Own.’ Her fiction uncovers the role of gender identities and their influence on the lives of females. The author tries to convey the darker realities of the conservative world that treats a woman differently from males. The story is a criticism of the patriarchal system favouring the males only. The author transmits the notion of limited roles played by females due to gender inequalities. Society acts against females by imposing sanctions, eliminating possibilities for growth and independence. She uses literature to confer the idea of limited opportunities available for female writers. In ‘A Room of One’s Own’, she mentions, “it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare’s day should have Shakespeare’s genius” (Woolf 62). The text reveals that females lack equal economic opportunities. She compared the feminine writers with Shakespeare and identified discrimination. The criticism is invisible in her fiction

as she mentions that feminine writers do not get fame and support from the world due to social constraints. Her comments in the fiction are a protest against gender inequalities as she emphasizes the repercussions suffered by females (Koç).

The social vision of Gilman and Woolf emphasized revolutionizing society by promoting the concept of gender equality. The authors are females, depicting the role of personal experiences in their writing. The Yellow Wallpaper highlights the discontent and real-life experiences of women leading to nervous prostration. The main character in the fiction suffers from mental complications due to the social taboos that confined her to home. Woolf's personal life experiences influenced her writing as she encountered the Suffragette movement. She observed that the female authors were not receiving as much appreciation as males. Her desire to have a female literary tradition encouraged her to start writing. Gilman also used her writings to criticize the role of gender inequalities and discrimination.

The absence of female literary tradition limited the writing opportunities for females depicting the impact of conservatism. Having no distinct literary tradition influenced the role of females as writers. She explains that a woman has no room of her own, and she talks only about the male literary tradition. Woolf illustrates the feminine complexities; "she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire" because "she is at war with her lot" (Woolf 77). The author of the book conveys the belief that women will never achieve similar appreciation as male authors. Female authors are more likely to face criticism because society is not prepared to accept their independence and liberty. She further reveals gender differences by transmitting the idea that fewer female authors emerged in the literary world due to social constraints. Social sanctions restricted them from entering the literary world, and the few who displayed courage faced criticism and rebellion.

Gilman assesses the role of the dominant male society in terms of feminine restrictions. The author states that survival was impossible for the feminine character in the fiction due to the absence of independence. Gilman states, "With all her weakness, her unstable emotionality, her tendency to morally warp when long nervously ill, she is then far easier to deal with, far more amenable to reason, far more sure to be comfortable as a patient, than the man who is relatively in a like position" (Gilman 24). The psychiatrist in the fiction is unable to determine the actual cause of her sickness. Woolf confers that the experiences of men are entirely different from those of females. The world treats women indifferently, which leads to their deterioration and self-destruction. She criticizes that women would have made some achievements in the world of literature if they received the same appreciation and support from society. She accepts that the males dominate in literature because society does not criticize them or treat them unjustly. Her criticism is apparent, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 29). Gendered society and social constructs undermine the feminine role in the conservative world. She lacks economic independence, which makes her dependent on males. She implies that a woman lacks a personal life of her own, which restricts her functionality. The author identifies the role of social constraints on feminine life. According to Woolf, they are unable to make better use of their lives due to the conservative society. She further relates the limitations with the artistic skills of women as she is unable to make better use of them due to the restrictions she faces. The unavailability of privacy is apparent in the author's idea

of a 'room of her own', depicting females as more vulnerable to distractions (Heilmann).

Gilman also conveys the role of gender and sexuality affecting the lives of females. The author portrays gender discrimination as the social constraints that lead to her physical and mental illness. She mentions, "turn the sick role to their advantage, especially as a form of birth control. A doctor could help women by supporting her claims to be too sick for sex: he could recommend abstinence" (Gilman 39). Gilman, in the fiction, also represents the negative role of male figures, resulting in her subjugation. The diagnosis of the doctor is flawed as he fails to determine the exact reason for her illness. Gendered society becomes prominent when the doctor suggests rest to the female character. The unwillingness of the males in the novel to accept feminine desires also transmits the deeper meaning of gender inequalities. The absence of freedom also results in dissatisfaction with the woman. The errors in the doctor's diagnosis also reveal the males' inflexible attitude. The patriarchal society has a profound role in the personalities of male members, apparent in their non-compromising behaviours. John's failure to understand the reason for his wife's destruction reflects male dominance. He is unable to see a role outside the home or the character of a housewife for his partner (Lanser).

Woolf illustrates the adversities of social sanctions and gender stereotypes. She uses 'A Room of One's Own' to highlight how gendered society eliminates the possibilities of growth for women. Without privacy, they are unable to exploit their skills or recognize their talents. The restrictions influence her life choices, and it is apparent in her inability to visit the library. She criticizes the skills and creativity of males as the result of the opportunities and society's support. She states that men can prove their confidence only when they compare themselves with women and that society provides equal opportunities for them. Men consider women as inferior, but they fail to consider the reality that equal opportunities will prove females more competent. Woolf mentions, "Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time" (Woolf 104). The author identifies how restrictions influence the intellectual freedom of females as they are left with fewer opportunities to survive. Gender inequality is also the reason for their financial dependence on males. Money and material power allow males to enjoy superior statuses. They fear that equal economic opportunities will prove women as competent as males and also increase their monetary power. The criticism highlights how the patriarchal structure acts in favour of males, resulting in female oppression.

The narrator's illustration of the room in 'The Yellow Paper' exhibits how it plays the role of a torture chamber for the wife. The character of the husband depicts that he is a patriarchal male figure who wants to maintain the same husband-wife relationship as society constructs. The role of the husband as a dominant partner eliminates the freedom of his wife, confining her to the sick room. John wants his wife to follow the treatment prescriptions, transmitting the theme of female oppression. The author creates a feminine story explaining how the woman becomes insane due to her limited role in life. The wife lacks a life of her own, which results in her self-destruction and devastation.

Her limited role in life confines her to the home, which later becomes evident in her mental illness.

The description of the room reflects sanity, “This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not then” (Gilman 18). The author uses the theme of gender discrimination, apparent in the desires of the woman to escape the reality of the room. The room represents the socially sanctioned society that decides the role of housewife or mother for the females. Gilman criticizes the patriarchal system where females have no life outside their homes. The reason behind the sickness of John’s wife is the same limitations imposed by society. He fails to identify the actual cause of his wife’s mental illness. The description of the room captures the broken relationship between the couple due to the absence of freedom and opportunities for the female partner.

Woolf identifies the need for feminine literature as only possible if females acquire the same freedom and independence as males. The male literature emphasizes masculinity that again undermines the role of females, limiting them to homes. Woolf mentions, “It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine” (Woolf 97). The author stresses gender equality and the creation of similar opportunities for both genders. Eliminating females from the literary world affects intellectualism and creativity. The author, in conclusion, emphasizes that women must have the same opportunities as males. Their engagement in the literary world is the only way to change the gendered stereotypes and social constraints.

Gilman and Woolf, in their writings, capture the realities of gender inequalities and discrimination. Restrictions faced by females influence their personalities and lives negatively. Both authors are females who experienced limited growth opportunities for females. Gilman’s fiction depicts unequal rights in the male-female relationship. The sickness of John’s wife is the outcome of the gender stereotypes that eliminate the concept of personal life or independence. Woolf uncovers the negative impact of social constructs on females. The social constructs confine female to houses, while unequal literary opportunities result in their absence from literature for years. She criticizes the idea that equal opportunities would make females more independent and confident. Gilman and Woolf accept feminine weaknesses as the result of the patriarchal system supporting males only. Male superiority and dominance resulted in feminine oppression and gender subjugation.

Work Cited

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