

Research Article

## Maternal Silence, Medical Patriarchy, and Postpartum Depression in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

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**Abstract:** Motherhood has conventionally been associated with feelings of care, consideration, nurture, and self-fulfillment. However, many literary texts deconstruct this myth by highlighting the nuances of new mothers' lived experiences. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), is a Victorian-era short story that holds a seminal place in this regard. The proposed paper aims to conduct a literary investigation of how the writer has articulated the ideas of maternal silence and medical patriarchy in the selected text. The paper draws on the theoretical frameworks of Adrienne Rich and Simone de Beauvoir. It analyzes how patriarchal medical interventions play their part in the suppression of maternal voices and the psychological breakdown of women. Gilman has subtly critiqued the treatment of women's depression in the nineteenth century in this particular work. Partly inspired by her own experiences, Gilman reflects on how the "rest cure" was enforced on women in the Victorian era. The paper thus challenges the myth of the ideal mother and unveils the maternal suffering that women have undergone throughout history.

**Keywords:** Motherhood Studies; Maternal Silence, Gender; Mental Health; Medical Patriarchy

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**Introduction**

The discourse of Motherhood has always been associated with the ideals of care, nurture, self-sacrifice, and joyousness. An ideal mother is assumed to be emotionally self-sufficient and extend all the love and warmth she carries to the newborn. However, the societal expectations and conventions do not highlight the affective and psychological deterioration that new mothers experience after childbirth. In everyday language, this phase is referred to as the 'Baby Blues', officially called Postpartum Depression. Postpartum Depression is a mood disorder that affects nearly fifteen percent of the world's women after childbirth. It occurs at three main levels: Maternity Blues or the Baby Blues, Postpartum Depression or Postnatal Depression, and the most extreme form, which is called Postpartum Psychosis or Puerperal Psychosis. Although this topic has found ample space in the purview of Psychology, Literary Studies are yet to acknowledge its presence in the mainstream works.

Feminist scholarship has critically examined how these conventional representations, as Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born* (1976), distinguished between the experience of Motherhood and Mothering. She notes the difference between Motherhood and Mothering in the following words, " I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women- shall remain under male control." (Rich 13)

Simone de Beauvoir also observes that the sense of female identity is socially constructed, and that motherhood is often thrust upon women as a major role. Her famous line from the book *The Second Sex* (1949) sums up her observations. "One is not born but rather becomes a woman." (Beauvoir 267) Women are expected to perform certain gender roles within our patriarchal society, especially that of an 'ideal mother' who is meant to possess a caring and nurturing nature. Maternal trauma thus remains unacknowledged and unrecognized. One significantly unexplored terrain is that of Postpartum Mental Distress. The term has gained currency only in recent years, yet different literary texts from varied periods have depicted this emotional turmoil in different ways. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* offers the most compelling critique of maternal silence and patriarchally hegemonized medical practices. The domain of Literature has an enormous potential to capture the repressed voices of new mothers and help them reclaim control over their own bodies.

**Research Gap and Scope of the Study**

*The Yellow Wallpaper* depicts the deteriorating condition of the narrator after childbirth, which eventually develops into hysteria. Although this text has been extensively studied from the purview of gender, confinement, and madness, little emphasis has been given to contextualizing this condition as a severe case of Postpartum Mental Health. The proposed paper thus aims to study this research gap by examining how the narrator's condition exhibits symptoms similar to what we today refer to as Postpartum Depression. It also seeks to address how this condition is heavily

affected by the role of medical intervention and the role of patriarchal authority, resulting in systemic silencing of the voices of new mothers, which results in their psychological deterioration. The paper thus makes a literary investigation of how this text represents maternal silence and critiques medical patriarchy, thus arguing that the narrator's mental breakdown occurs as a result of systemic repression.

### **Gendered Expectations of Motherhood**

Patriarchal societies classify women through their conventional roles of caregivers and homemakers. These norms strengthen the gendered expectations of women feeling emotionally and psychologically self-sufficient following childbirth. This, however, does not hold. New mothers go through varied phases of emotional and psychological instability. Beauvoir observes that women are conditioned into these roles, thereby limiting their autonomy. (Beauvoir 301). Adrienne Rich further suggests that the institution of motherhood serves to regulate women's behavior and maintain patriarchal control. While motherhood can be a meaningful personal experience, it is often shaped by societal expectations that limit women's autonomy (Rich 14). These expectations contribute to maternal silence, in which women are unable to express their emotional and psychic struggles due to fear of social stigma. Women who experience maternal anxiety or depression may therefore conceal their inner conflicts owing to societal pressure to become the 'ideal' mother to their child. Betty Friedan also tells us about how the idealization of domestic roles often masks women's psychological dissatisfaction. (Friedan 15). *The Yellow Wallpaper* gives a striking example of how maternal silence is enforced within both domestic and medical contexts.

### **Medical Patriarchy and Postpartum Depression**

Gilman's narrator is diagnosed with a "temporary nervous breakdown" after childbirth. Her condition can be interpreted as bearing resemblance to what we contemporarily refer to as 'Postpartum Depression'. The condition of Gilman's narrator also closely resembles Gilman's own. In the mid-1880s, Gilman, in her own words, suffered from 'a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia and beyond' (Gilman, *Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper*, 1913). Her worsening situation led her to seek the treatment of the famous American neurologist, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell. The medical patriarchy is closely associated with the treatments meted out by Dr. Mitchell and others for the treatment of women diagnosed with nervous breakdowns.

The narrator of the short story "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" exhibits symptoms of fatigue, isolation, distress, and emotional imbalance. These symptoms are studied and researched effectively in existing medical practices. However, nineteenth-century medical discourse characterized these conditions as a single category, 'madness'. Beauvoir's perspective defines this consolidated classification as the tendency to define women's experiences within restrictive frameworks. (Beauvoir 301). The narrator observes, "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman 648). This fact reflects the normalization of emotional invalidation for nineteenth-century women.

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## Maternal Hysteria and Institutionalization of Medical Patriarchy in the Victorian Period:

Victorian women who underwent a 'nervous and emotional breakdown' were often classified under the broad category of hysteria. This category functioned more as a cultural construct than as a medical classification, acting as a touchstone through which female behavior was interpreted. Women with extreme anxiety, dissatisfaction, or emotional intensity were characterized as being 'hysterical', reinforcing the perception of them being mentally unsound and in need of control. Beauvoir suggests this scenario as the reduction of women to passive and dependent beings within patriarchal society (Beauvoir 301). Thus, women's psychological conditions underwent misleading diagnoses.

The institutionalization of this approach is associated with Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, an American neurologist, whose development of the "Rest Cure" treatment became a popular ailment for women with nervous breakdowns. Mitchell's treatment prescribed complete isolation, enforced inactivity, and restriction in any intellectual endeavor. The "Rest Cure" presents itself as an excellent example of medical patriarchy, which, under the garb of therapeutic medical intervention, propagated the traditional gender roles by promoting passivity, dependence, and silence.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's situation reminds the reader of principles similar to those of the "rest cure". The narrator is strictly confined to a domestic space and socially discouraged from engaging in any intellectual endeavors. Gilman had also undergone this treatment, and her short story criticizes its limitations and consequences. Adrienne Rich posits that such practices illustrate how institutions governing women's lives -including medicine- function to regulate female identity and maintain patriarchal control. (Rich 14).

These orthodox medical practices have thus been responsible for suppressing maternal voices and encouraging submission towards the oppressive medical system. The narrator's condition, which bears resemblance to symptoms of postpartum mental distress, is aggravated rather than alleviated by such treatment. Thus, the diagnosis of hysteria and implementation of a rest cure together exemplify the institutionalization of medical patriarchy in the Victorian period. *The Yellow Wallpaper*, through its portrayal of such practices, exposes the limitations of a patriarchal system that privileged control over understanding.

### **The Rest Cure, Domestic Confinement, and Medical Control**

The Rest Cure serves a multipurpose control system- it is not only a medical treatment but also a means to assume the temporal and psychological control of 'hysterical' women. The narrator is confined to a single room described as a nursery; her temporal prohibition symbolically links motherhood with restriction and surveillance. The domestic space, usually associated with care, paradoxically becomes a confinement. John, the narrator's husband and her physician, repetitively metes out this treatment over both the narrator's physical environment and her mental condition. Beauvoir and Rich opine that these conditions depict systems that define women as

passive and regulate their identities through institutional control (Beauvoir 301; Rich 14). The rest cure encourages the narrator to remain silent by denying her both intellectual and emotional expressions. This treatment aggravates her psychological breakdown, demonstrating how medical practices can propagate rather than resolve pain. This medical treatment reflects the gendered medical setup of the nineteenth century, which often dismissed women's mental health concerns as 'madness' or 'hysteria'. Gilman's critique of medical patriarchy brings into light the dangers of a rigid system that prioritizes control over empathy, particularly in relation to women's mental health.

The room symbolizes the limitations imposed upon women within the patriarchal setup. The narrator's inability to leave the space reflects her lack of agency, independence, and her continuous state of psychological degradation. The narrator becomes increasingly fixated on the wallpaper in her room. The wallpaper, with its difficult and disturbing patterns, becomes a focal point for her psychological anxiety. She mentions "The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out." (Gilman 650). The trapped figure in the wallpaper represents the narrator's own sense of entrapment and her own inability to break the patriarchal confinement enforced over her. It symbolizes the suppressed female identity struggling to break free from societal constraints. The domestic space, therefore, functions not as a site of comfort but as a prison that reinforces maternal silence and psychological repression.

### **Writing as Resistance and Female Agency**

The narrator reclaims her suppressed voice through writing. Despite the prohibitions imposed upon her, the narrator expresses her inner self through writing. She keeps a diary in secret, using it to vent her thoughts. Writing thus becomes an act of resistance against the patriarchal setup that forces the narrator to remain silent. The narrator acknowledges how penning down has helped her regain sanity: "I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!" (Gilman 649). This statement highlights the therapeutic function of writing. However, the secrecy of her writing helps the reader understand how the female voice was forbidden from engaging in any intellectual endeavor within the broader patriarchal discourse. Her secret journal empowers her and also reminds the reader of her isolation. A feminist outlook here would apprehend writing as a form of empowerment. Journaling her thoughts thus allows the narrator to reclaim her lost voice and resist the enforced oppression of the society.

Beauvoir asserts that such expression can be understood as an attempt to move beyond imposed roles and reclaim individual identity. (Beauvoir 301). Similarly, Adrienne Rich opines that women's voices have historically been suppressed within institutional frameworks that regulate their identities (Rich 14). Writing thus provides a medium of limited resistance through which the female voice can reclaim its identity.

### **Psychological Breakdown and Maternal Silence**

The progression in the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* shows us how the narrator's progression with the figure in the wallpaper intensifies, reflecting a diffusion

of identity. The trapped figure represents her own broken self, symbolizing how her condition has deteriorated psychologically because of control. This mental breakdown can be understood not simply as an individual phenomenon but also as a result of the systemic suppression imposed upon the narrator. Her distress is thus both intensified and misunderstood by the patriarchal medical setup of the time. The narrator's breakdown thus turns out not to be an individual failure but a critical reflection on the broader institutional forces that suppress female voice and agency.

### **Reimagining Motherhood and Female Agency**

The story's narrative challenges the idealized conventions associated with motherhood and elucidates that it is, in fact, a complex institution with its own emotional and psychological phases, especially following childbirth. Motherhood as an act does not remain inherently fulfilling at the time when the new mother herself is in a state of battling identity issues, psychological tensions, and societal pressure to be a good mother to her child. The way the narrator is confined by her husband-cum-physician only underscores the gap between the expected and the actual experiences of motherhood. Ultimately, the story deconstructs the idea of motherhood not as a rigid identity but as a space shaped by power, control, and resistance. The reader can understand the maternal identity only within the context of the societal constructs of patriarchy. *The Yellow Wallpaper* thus exposes the limitations of idealized motherhood and emphasizes the need for society to recognize women's psychological and emotional needs.

### **Conclusion**

*The Yellow Wallpaper* reviews the notions of medical patriarchy and maternal silence that were prevalent in the Victorian era. Through a strong literary representation of a woman misunderstood to be mentally unsound, the story exposes the harmful effects of denying women agency and voice. The narrator's psychological downfall highlights the consequences of a rigid system that fails to recognize women's experiences. The greatest danger lies not in the women's condition, but in the system that refuses to listen. The text also helps the reader to understand the broader definitions of gender and identity, which are not only confined to the patriarchal setup but also to the importance of mental health, especially that of new mothers.

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