

A Study on the Binary Opposition Structure in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a classic work of feminist literature, which profoundly reveals the survival predicament and the awakening of subjectivity of women in the patriarchal society. This essay employs binary opposition analysis method, integrating feminism theory, discourse and power theory and space theory, to systematically deconstruct the heroine's resistance path from four dimensions: gender power, cognitive style, existence status and spatial politics. Through the intersectional interpretation from different theoretical perspectives, this study not only expands the interpretation space of the text, but also reveals the enlightening significance of the female resistance paradigm constructed by Gilman for contemporary women's pursuit of discourse power, providing a new interpretation approach for feminist literary criticism.

Keywords

"The Yellow Wallpaper", binary opposition, feminism, discourse and power, spatial politics.

1. Introduction

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), as a great feminist writer, made unremitting efforts to fight for women's rights and freedom. After experiencing her first marriage and giving birth to a daughter, Gilman suffered from postpartum depression and was forced to undergo unreasonable treatment. Following this, she completed the writing of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). The narrator in the novel shares similar experiences with Gilman - being confined by her husband John in an attic covered with yellow wallpaper after childbirth. Under the guise of "care," the husband oppresses and controls his wife, ultimately leading the narrator to tear down the wallpaper through stigmatized "irrational" resistance labeled as "madness," thereby breaking free from patriarchal control.

As a classic text of feminist literature, "The Yellow Wallpaper" has remained a persistent focus of academic research both domestically and internationally. Reviewing existing research findings, domestic scholars mainly concentrate on traditional feminist critique dimensions such as female consciousness and female imagery. Although some studies have attempted to introduce Foucault's disciplinary power theory or spatial political perspectives [1], there remains an overall limitation of singular theoretical perspectives. Particularly noteworthy is that current research is mostly confined to the analytical framework of gender binary opposition, failing to fully explore the multiple binary opposition structures inherent in the text. As one of the core concepts of structuralist theory, binary opposition is widely applied in fields such as literary criticism and cultural studies, suitable for multidimensional analysis from different aspects. In view of this, this study breaks through the singular feminist interpretive paradigm and systematically constructs a four-dimensional analytical framework encompassing gender power (male vs. female), cognitive modes ("rational" submission vs. "irrational" resistance), states of existence (surface order vs. deep truth), and spatial politics

(public space vs. private space). This framework provides a more tension-filled critical perspective for interpreting the text by deeply analyzing the protagonist's multiple resistance strategies under patriarchal oppression.

2. Male and Female

In feminist literary works, the opposition between male and female often constitutes the core conflict. "The Yellow Wallpaper" precisely reveals patriarchal oppression of women through this opposition. By depicting male authoritative positions and female deep dilemmas, the novel exposes how this positional inequality causes profound persecution of women's mental and psychological states. As a typical representative of the patriarchal system, the male protagonist John implements gender oppression on his wife by monopolizing rational discourse power. His authoritative status as a doctor is essentially a concentrated manifestation of male-centric power structures. "Discourse, as speech acts expressing truth, inevitably leads to oppression and control, conspiracy and violence in the struggle for discursive power"[2]. The patriarchal society's monopoly of male discursive power demonstrates the inevitability of female oppression and control. In the patriarchal society depicted in "The Yellow Wallpaper," male oppression of women through discursive power advantage is mainly reflected in husband John's oppression of his wife. As a physician, John uses his medical discourse power to oppress his wife. The narrator mentions, "He is a physician of high standing, and my husband. If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency - what is one to do?"[3]. Thus, John, possessing both medical authority and male discursive power, naturally gains social recognition for his diagnosis, while the female protagonist in a disadvantaged position is forced to submit to this domination. More notably, when another male doctor - the narrator's brother - makes the same diagnosis, the female protagonist's self-judgment is completely marginalized. This structural imbalance of discursive power profoundly reveals the unequal nature of gender power relations.

In addition, male authority's oppression of women is also reflected in husband John's dual control over his wife's body and mind. In the novel, John's physical control over his wife is comprehensive. "He deliberately placed 'me' in the 'nursery' on the top floor, giving 'me' 'considerate' and 'loving' 'care' like treating an infant, keeping 'me' under his strict surveillance in every move"[1]. John beautifies this spatial confinement of his wife as beneficial for her physical recovery, while his oppression of his wife's living environment is one manifestation of physical control. Moreover, John creates hourly schedules for his wife and arranges his sister Jennie - a perfect and kind-hearted housewife - to monitor her, even depriving his wife of the basic right as a mother to care for their child. The husband's arrangement of his wife's diet and sleep habits, though seemingly "scientific" and "for her health," actually strips her of basic adult rights. Beyond physical constraints, John also imposes mental control. The husband prohibits his wife from writing and working, admonishing her to overcome "fantasies," further confirming the inequality in status and power between men and women.

As an oppressed disadvantaged group, one of women's dilemmas is the severe limitation of various rights, primarily reflected in the non-public nature of female discursive power in "The Yellow Wallpaper." "In patriarchal society, women exist as the Other relative to men"[4]. This binary opposition that establishes men as subjects and constructs women as Others reveals the dilemma of female oppression - women become products of patriarchal social power operations. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the oppressed female protagonist can only soothe her emotions by secretly keeping a diary behind her husband's back, precisely demonstrating the private and non-public nature of female discursive power. The diary entries are frequently interrupted by the appearances of John and his sister, with male authoritative suppression

resulting in the diary's fragmented narrative mode, becoming a distorted form of existence for suppressed female discourse. Due to the non-public nature of female discursive power, suppressed female discourse exacerbates women's survival dilemmas. Continuous physical and mental oppression renders writing as an outlet ineffective, forcing the protagonist to turn to physical expression - constructing a new language of resistance through stigmatized "mad" behaviors like crawling and tearing wallpaper. The core metaphor of "trapped women" behind the yellow wallpaper throughout the text is also an expression of female suppressed selfhood, reflecting the universal fate of women's imprisonment. The narrator mentions in her diary, "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind"[3], suggesting the wallpaper's trapped women are multiple, implying this is a shared fate across generations. These "crawling" women symbolize those confined in domestic "cages," deprived of autonomous movement and rights to work and write. Through this metaphor, the author indicates that women's dilemmas are not isolated cases but universal problems caused by social structural issues.

"Madwomen are not born but made by socio-cultural forces"[5]. Precisely under prolonged male authoritative oppression and severely limited power, the female protagonist ultimately completes the subversion of identity from "patient" to "madwoman in the attic," tearing off the socially imposed label of "wife" and placing herself in an active position. The narrator finally declares she has torn the wallpaper herself and her husband can no longer put her back, vividly demonstrating how tearing the wallpaper symbolizes women breaking social discipline and winning discursive power. By contrasting male authority with female oppression's disparate positions, Gilman exposes the exploitative nature of patriarchy, reflecting the urgency for institutional change. Using "madness" as a weapon against oppressors forces readers to confront the unsolvable nature of gender oppression. There is no so-called moderate solution - only dismantling power itself.

3. "Rational" Submission vs. "Irrational" Resistance

Under the "rational" discipline of patriarchy, the protagonist's survival dilemma ultimately erupts in the form of madness. This stigmatized "irrational" resistance forms the core binary opposition in the text with tamed "rational" submission. By depicting the protagonist's transformation from "rational" submission to "irrational" resistance, the novel reveals the inevitability of "irrational" resistance under "rational" discipline. Initially, the protagonist believes her husband's advice might be correct: "Of course I don't want to anger him with momentary whims"[3], demonstrating her "rational" submission to her husband. Forced to comply with her husband's medical orders to control fantasies through willpower, this obedience leads her to deliberately suppress her writing desires and psychological activities.

However, John continues to impose "rational" discipline on his wife, keeping her in a passive position. Under the pretext of having no alternative, John confines his wife to the rooftop nursery. Originally designed for disciplining children, the nursery has barred windows and fixed beds - this prison-like environment is now used to discipline his wife. The nursery itself functions as a micro-disciplinary institution, where the room's design transforms physical constraints into psychological oppression, forcing women to become "rational" submitters. The protagonist is imprisoned in a cage called "home," with the confined living space symbolizing society's "rational" discipline over women.

Moreover, the husband attempts to erase his wife's subjective consciousness through psychological suppression, molding her into a submissive appendage. Regarding her condition, the protagonist believes more social activities, stimulating experiences and suitable work would benefit her, but her husband dismisses these as fantasies about her situation and "irrational" judgments. By vilifying his wife's correct judgments as "fantasies" and labeling them "irrational," the husband's cruelty is fully exposed. After prolonged exposure to this

"rational" disciplinary environment, the protagonist gradually awakens and embarks on the path of "irrational" resistance.

Women in passive positions are forced to adopt "irrational" resistance to evade social and male discipline, seeking their own freedom and liberation. The protagonist abandons the constraints called "rationality" and chooses the path of "irrational" resistance to break the system's shackles. As the plot develops, the protagonist's increasingly profound hallucinatory interpretations of the yellow wallpaper parallel the awakening of her resistance consciousness. Initially, the protagonist only observes the chaotic patterns and colors on the wallpaper's surface. Later, she begins hallucinating about "creeping women" behind the wallpaper. At this point, the women in the wallpaper become projections of the protagonist herself, reflecting her imprisoned state. Finally, the protagonist merges her identity with the hallucinated women, representing her complete rejection of the disciplined identity.

Additionally, secretly keeping a diary away from John and his sister Jennie was originally the protagonist's way of finding solace. But as she embraces "irrational" resistance, the diary transitions from recording facts to documenting wallpaper hallucinations, suggesting the protagonist's language shifting from writing to hallucination, from "rational" to "irrational," with escalating conflict. The "creeping women" hallucinations become the protagonist's new language, through which she expresses her imprisoned self-awareness. Although hallucinations as language are "irrational," in a context where men monopolize rational discourse, hallucinations become the only "language" the protagonist can control, demonstrating the inevitability of "irrational" resistance. In fact, this "irrational" resistance is "closer to happiness and truth than reason, closer to reason than reason itself"[6]. In the novel, the protagonist's "irrational" madness brings her closer to happiness than rationality, as this "irrational" resistance liberates her from imposed "rationality," achieving freedom and liberation. That this madness is closer to reason than rationality itself lies in its revelation of the truth concealed beneath "rational" discipline. The "rationality" of patriarchy is less humane than women's so-called "irrational" choices, directly exposing the system's cruelty.

"Rational" submission and "irrational" resistance reflect the two possible outcomes for women in patriarchal society - submission or madness. In the novel, John's sister Jennie embodies "submission." "She helps John monitor and imprison 'me,' showing no sympathy or understanding as a fellow woman, instead imposing psychological restraints"[7]. Successfully disciplined, she ultimately becomes patriarchy's accomplice, assisting John in surveilling the protagonist. The protagonist, as the embodiment of "madness," ultimately chooses resistance. This contrast highlights society's extreme categorization of women - those who don't submit to "rational" discipline are labeled "irrational." If women choose submission, they remain enslaved forever; if they choose awakening, they must pay the price of madness. There is no perfect solution - this reflects the inherent cruelty of the system.

In the novel, the husband's continuous imposition of "rational" discipline coincides with the protagonist's gradual transformation through "irrational" resistance from a disciplined object to a resisting subject. At the story's end, the protagonist symbolically subverts the oppressive structure by tearing the wallpaper in a seemingly insane act. Successful in her resistance, she achieves self-awareness awakening, no longer remaining a "submissive" enslaved by male rational discipline. Through the binary opposition of "rational" submission and "irrational" resistance, the author portrays the protagonist's progressively intensifying psychological alienation process, ultimately deconstructing patriarchy's "rational" discipline in a subversive manner.

4. Public Space and Private Space

The Yellow Wallpaper reveals the power dynamics of space through the binary opposition between public and private spheres: public space is dominated by men, while private space becomes both a site of female alienation and potential liberation.

"Simone de Beauvoir divided the social world and social life into public space (workplace) and private space (home). Public space belongs to men, while private space is assigned to women"[8]. This gendered division of space exposes the spatial politics of patriarchy. The Yellow Wallpaper profoundly reveals the gendered politics of public space, demonstrating how male-dominated spatial power structures are enforced through spatial segregation. In the narrator's account, access to public space is monopolized by men like John, vividly illustrating the deprivation of women's social roles. The male protagonist, John, leaves home daily for work, sometimes not returning even at night when faced with difficult medical cases—this exemplifies his occupation of public space. In contrast, the female protagonist is forcibly confined to the private space of the home, with all aspects of her life subordinated to her husband's arrangements. John opposes his wife's social interactions and work-related activities, seeking to completely strip her of access to public space and trap her within the private sphere. However, not only are external workplaces and other public spaces denied to women, but the husband in the novel extends this gendered division even to the communal areas of the home—a supposedly private space. John's control over physical space is absolute, even within the household. He unilaterally decides to move into a colonial mansion for his wife's "recuperation," disregarding her unease about the house's eerie atmosphere. Despite the mansion being "quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village"[3], which already isolates her from public space, he insists on confining her to the attic. The protagonist repeatedly requests to change rooms but is refused under various pretexts, as the rest of the house is also claimed as male-dominated public space. The narrator notes that John "hardly lets me stir without special direction"[3], underscoring male domination over domestic space. Every room outside the attic is off-limits to her; John holds absolute control over the household, while the woman is expelled from its central domains. Trapped in the attic and isolated from external space, the protagonist can only observe public space through the window but cannot participate—a metaphor for her exclusion from public life. Whether in broader society or the home's internal spaces, all become arenas for male power, rendering women spatially marginalized.

For women relegated to the margins of domestic space, only a narrow private sphere remains—yet even this is inevitably alienated by male power. The protagonist's attic nursery, her sole private space and supposed sanctuary, is invaded by her husband's surveillance under the guise of medical care. The bedroom, traditionally a feminine refuge, is transformed into a prison due to male intervention, exemplifying how private space is alienated by patriarchal authority. "Lefebvre argues that power is the most fundamental and significant factor shaping space; its planning, management, confinement, and occupation are all permeated by power's rule. The body has always been the focal point of power's control"[9]. John leverages his medical authority to legitimize spatial control over his wife's private sphere, enforcing her bodily imprisonment. This male intrusion ultimately triggers the woman's rebellion under prolonged suppression, transforming the bedroom from a prison into a site of liberation.

In a calculated act, the protagonist locks her door to bar intrusion. She no longer wishes to leave, declaring, "I don't want to go outside. 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!"[3]. The bedroom, once a site of discipline, then a cage, now becomes her reclaimed territory of emancipation. This shift from infirmary to prison reflects male power's distortion of space, while its subsequent transformation into a zone of autonomy demonstrates women's reclamation of spatial agency. When men weaponize

space to confine, women reclaim it through bodily resistance—using seemingly "mad" physical acts to subvert power. "Space can be both a tool of oppression and a weapon of resistance"[10]. The protagonist's repurposing of her prison into a liberated domain epitomizes this dialectical spatial politics.

By narrating private space's alienation and reclamation, Gilman proposes a paradigm of resistance: seizing space through bodily defiance. Escape is no solution—under patriarchy, all spaces risk being co-opted as male "public domains." True liberation requires dismantling power and redefining the body's relationship to space.

5. Conclusion

A binary oppositional reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper* lays bare the systemic oppression women face under patriarchy. Through its artistic deployment of multiple dichotomies, the work exposes not only how male discursive hegemony disciplines female bodies and minds but also the gendered violence masked as "rationality." The protagonist's trajectory from forced submission to "irrational" rebellion constitutes the ultimate critique of patriarchal order—her "madness" harboring the oppressed's most lucid awakening. Moreover, her reclamation of private space through body politics transcends traditional feminist frameworks, offering fresh insights into power-resistance dialectics. As a landmark of feminist literature, the novel's enduring value lies not only in its thematic innovation but also in its crafting of an iconic allegory of resistance. The "yellow wallpaper"—both a materialization of patriarchal oppression and a catalyst for female consciousness—remains a richly symbolic focus of scholarship. The text's unrelenting pursuit of individual freedom and its deconstruction of gendered domestic roles cement its status as a timeless classic.

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