



**Shiraz University**

**Faculty of Literature and Humanities**

**M. A. Thesis in English Language and Literature**

**The Study of Portrayal of Women in Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wall-paper* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

By

**Maryam Yazdani**

Supervised by

**Parvin Ghasemi, Ph. D.**

**January 2014**

**IN THE NAME OF GOD**

## **Declaration**

### **In the Name of God**

**Hereby, I, Maryam Yazdani (908931), student of English Literature, Faculty of International Division, certify that this thesis results from my own research and whenever I have utilized other sources, I have clearly made reference to them. I also declare that the research and the title of my thesis are novel. I also promise not to publish the findings of this research and not to make it accessible to others without the permission of Shiraz University, which holds the copyright of this research.**

**Name: Maryam Yazdani**

**Date: January 2014**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

**I would love to express my heartfelt thanks and profound indebtedness to Dr. Ghasemi for her generous supply of resources and vital suggestions. I am also deeply grateful and feel highly beholden to Dr. Abjadian who has been so inspirational in forming the nucleus of this study. I also sincerely thank Dr. Pourgiv for being so open to my decisions. My special thanks go to my family whose kind support and unconditional love made my work easier.**

## **Abstract**

### **The Study of Portrayal of Women in Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wall-paper* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

By

**Maryam Yazdani**

Generations of female writers faced the common obstacles and difficulties to be accepted in the society that was ruled by men for centuries. The dominant male society imposed their ideology on women for a long time and deprived them of their own identity. Meanwhile, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the inferior position which was occupied by women in the patriarchal society started to change. The literary world witnessed a change in form and content and more female writers came to the surface. Kate Chopin and Charlotte Gilman were among these rebellious writers who regardless of all difficulties and prejudice thorough out the 19<sup>th</sup> century society, portrayed the women's suffrage, their needs and desires in their literary texts. While the new era gave women the opportunity to defy the patriarchal society and demanded to be known as individuals, the 19<sup>th</sup> century culture was not ready for all these changes at once but it paved the way for the next generation. The next generation of feminist critics aimed to re-discover the forgotten texts from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards and introduce them to the modern literary cannon. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wall-paper* came as the early feminist literary texts that defied the male

dominant society and presented a clear vision of the nineteenth-century patriarchal society and the imposed American ideology on women.

Key words: patriarchal society, female writers, feminist critics, ideology, nineteenth-century women,

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENT	PAGE
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b> _____	<b>II</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b> _____	<b>III</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: Introduction</b> _____	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1. Background</b> _____	<b>2</b>
<b>1.2 Significance of the Study</b> _____	<b>5</b>
<b>1.3 The Objective of the Study</b> _____	<b>6</b>
<b>1.4 Literature Review</b> _____	<b>7</b>
<b>1.5 Methodology</b> _____	<b>13</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: Methodology</b> _____	<b>15</b>
<b>2.1. An Overview of Feminism</b> _____	<b>16</b>
<b>2.2 Nineteenth-Century Feminism</b> _____	<b>20</b>
<b>2.3 Nineteenth-century Women and Education</b> _____	<b>24</b>
<b>2.4. Elaine Showalter and Modern Criticism</b> _____	<b>28</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE: The Awakening</b> _____	<b>33</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction</b> _____	<b>34</b>

<b>3.2 Gradual Awakening</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>3.3. Chopin's Women and the Patriarchal Society</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: The Yellow Wallpaper</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>4.1. Introduction</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>4.2. Women liberation</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>WORK CITED</b>	<b>91</b>



# **CHAPTER ONE**

# Introduction

## 1.1. Background

*The Awakening* (1899) and *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) are two groundbreaking stories which deal with women's problems in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century written respectively by two great American writers: Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) and Kate Chopin (1850-1904). Gilman and Chopin attempt to convey women's frustration with their society and socially restricted roles in their literary works. In each story, their characters are faced with opportunities to escape from their typical roles and to experience the taste of freedom and independence. While Gilman's attention is on women's need to be independent and to have an internal and mental control over their life, Chopin's attention is more on the physical freedom of the women and their effort to find love and autonomy in a society that denies their needs. Each novel tries to explain the women's problem from the female author's point of view.

Living in a time when women had no major roles or even opinions, these two woman writers brought up a notion to change the destiny of women for good. Alongside their former leaders like Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Candy Stanton and Susan. B. Anthony on their mission to give voice to the unheard people who were the victims of the patriarchal society, Chopin and Gilman made their voices heard through their protagonists' conflicts and struggles with the society in order to gain freedom and independence. Each worked with the goal to present the women's problems in the

patriarchal society of the nineteenth- century, making their views available to the readers of that time, but they did not receive the appreciation they were waiting for until the second wave of feminism re-discovered these forgotten texts and brought them to the attention.

Charlotte Gilman expresses her concern for women's inability to defend themselves and their perpetual state of submission in her semi-autobiographical novella *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The story is also her response to the popular treatment of her time called the rest cure invented by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a psychological treatment which Gilman herself underwent after the birth of her daughter Katherine. This treatment involves isolation from friends and family and sometimes the patients are prohibited from talking, reading and writing. The protagonist in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is in the same situation as she is in a complete submissive position and all her arguments and needs are ignored. Her only way to take control over her life is to lose all her contacts with reality and consequently move toward hallucination. Gilman's main goal is to show that the patriarchal society has always tried to suppress women as a social and economical dependant creature who has no civil rights to cry out their predicaments. As Gilman stated in her article, she believed that the best result in writing her novella was: "Many years later I was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*" (5).

Gilman expresses her concern mostly about women's mental freedom; however, Chopin's protagonist experiences a gradual awakening of her own emotional and individual "being," and longs for independence that society would not permit her.

She searches for the physical realities of her feminine role and in an attempt to gain her freedom she breaks the rules of the patriarchal society and her stereotypical role as a mother and wife.

While *The Yellow Wallpaper* earned some appreciation from the critics of its time, *The Awakening* did not receive the same reaction. The novel came within the reach of many readers, a coming that very soon was ended and led to its stagnancy for more than 60 years; despite its all-acknowledged artistic sophistication the novel was condemned for the lack of “morality” and “cruel subject matter”. Edna the rebellious protagonist is rejected as a woman who abandons her role in matrimonial and maternal spheres and cherishes her physical satisfaction.

Gilman and Chopin’s literary works are narrated from the point of view of female protagonists who fight for their own place in the patriarchal society until they break themselves free from that world, via suicide in *The Awakening* or insanity in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Although some readers may blame the protagonist herself, what is significant is the realization of the fact that both women prefer sanity and death to going back to live in an oppressive patriarchal society.

However, Chopin and Gilman differ greatly on what they want to accomplish for women. For Kate Chopin, to attain self recognition and individual identity is the highest goal they could achieve. She must be independent financially from her husband and be able to live the life that she pleases. Gilman, on the other hand, prefers the mental freedom of women and the removal of the responsibilities that are traditionally put on

women's shoulders. Both protagonists present similarity with their creators as if they were picturing their experiences and confrontation with the society.

## **1.2 Significance of the Study**

The nineteenth century is the period in which feminism, known as women's movement, comes to be a social reality. In this period the question of family and its values comes to the surface, since the upper-middle class women's roles are not limited only to motherhood and spinsterhood anymore. These two female authors write two books with female protagonists to show that women also have problems in this patriarchal society. Kate Chopin is known as the forerunner of feminist authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; she places her character Edna Pontellier on an Island to start a journey to self realization, independence and awakening. Although her actions and behavior may not be acceptable to everyone, it gives Edna the happiness she has always searched for. When she figures out that she cannot go back to her old self, she surrenders to the ocean that once has given her happiness and liberation.

Conventionally, Women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had no choice to disagree or to act unorthodoxly but Chopin's Edna Pontellier becomes a rebel who will not bend to the patriarchal social impositions anymore. On the other hand, Gilman is a utopian feminist who serves as a role model for future generations of feminists because of her unorthodox concepts and lifestyle. She creates a unique atmosphere for her protagonist in order to set her free from all the boundaries she is trapped in. It might seem that her only goal is to criticize "the rest cure" treatment but the message revealed behind the

text is women's oppression. Gilman uses the woman behind the wallpaper to show the pressure upon the women in the society and the forces which eventually led them to insanity and hysterical actions.

However, putting these two novels together, one protagonist in the search of her own identity and the other to gain control of her life and have more responsibilities, both characters are paving the road for the next generation to be more bold and courageous and to follow their own dreams and do not settle for less than self-affirmation. Overall, these two novels together present the cry against the injustice toward the women, and the woman's need for liberations from all her oppressive chores as the typical women figure in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, it is very significant to study these two pioneer works of female authors who investigate the issue of women's search for self-independence and identity. No previous study has been conducted to analyze these two texts from this perspective.

### **1.3 The Objective of the Study**

This study aims at analyzing Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* within the framework of feministic studies, in the light of the 19<sup>th</sup> century feminisms and Elaine Showalter's theories. This thesis will investigate Edna's gradual awakening and Julie's madness based on Showalter's theories of "*Hysteria*" and other feminist concepts.

The main objective of this thesis is to illustrate the oppression imposed by the patriarchal society on women and how the 19<sup>th</sup> century females try to set themselves free from their male relatives' dependence and become independent individual beings who have power and freedom and are able to support themselves. Female liberation and empowerment are the main goals of Chopin and Gilman as their protagonists must face difficulties and major obstacles to achieve them. But the cost of this awakening and self-realization is very high and leads the protagonist to the edge of madness and suicide. Thus, the 19<sup>th</sup> century mentality becomes subject to reconsideration.

Chopin and Gilman started a wave that cannot be ignored any more. They gave their characters a chance to be themselves and not bend to their society's impositions anymore; they were able to defy the American ideology of women's role solely as a mother and wife. Chopin and Gilman like their protagonists are women ahead of their time and they tried to break the taboo of marriage and motherhood in the nineteenth-century patriarchal society. These two novels about women's problem with a main female character in the center indicate that women can have their own voices and civil rights and can be known as individual human beings.

#### **1.4 Literature Review**

This study covers the application of 19<sup>th</sup> century feminisms and Elaine Showalter's theories on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Since the feministic studies cover a wide range of issues, many articles and books explore these two subject matters. While there is a considerable

number of critical works on Kate Chopin and Charlotte Gilman and the selected works, no study has covered these two novels together from this angle and exclusively from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Showalter's ideas. However, since the feminism wave has been discussed in books and articles by critics and authors, it seems reasonable to mention their ideas and their researches, as a means of assistance to this study. The history of women's development will be discussed from the early ages until present time. The concept of three phases of femininity which was brought up by Elaine Showalter will be incorporated into the rest of the thesis. For the relevant feminism discussion the researcher is going to use Gilman's writings about women liberation movements and social evolution "*Women and economics: A study of the economic relation between men and women as a factor in social evolution*" in (1898) Sarah Gamble's "*The Routledge companion to feminism and post feminism*" (2001), and David Lodge "*Modern Criticism and Theory*" (2008). These three fundamental texts provide the necessary background for the exploration of the status of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century era.

The critical reception of Kate Chopin's *Awakening* contains many valuable books and articles. Many critics refer to her novel as a feminist novel while Donald A. Ringe in his article "*Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's The Awakening*" mentions other aspects of the novel too. He focuses on Edna's gradual awakening and the romantic imagery Chopin used to convey her message to the readers. Sea, ocean and other nature elements and their concepts help the process of awakening but eventually, as she gained what she was looking for, she could sacrifice herself for the sake of others. Ringe concludes at the end that "Since Edna cannot give herself to anyone, but instead



remains aloof from any true relationship with another, she is doomed to stand completely alone in the universe, a position that is clearly symbolized by the final episode in the book: her solitary swim far out into the emptiness of the Gulf” (587). Maria Anastasopoulou discusses the reasons of Edna’s failure in her journey in her article “Rites of Passage in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*”(1991). She argues that since Edna lost her connection with reality and was repulsed and terrified by the actions of other female characters presented in her life, she is no longer able to breathe in this society and that is why she commits suicide; and at the end Anastasopoulou concludes that “Edna, in one word, fails because she does not possess the courageous soul; The soul that dares and defies, as Mademoiselle Reisz warns her (29)”. Peggy Skaggs “*Three Tragic Figures in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening*” (1974) presents a comparison on three main female characters and their effort to achieve their full identities, each on their own standards. Adele sets her goal on mother-woman partial identity while Mademoiselle Reisz defines herself as an artist. Both females accept their partial identity but Edna is not satisfied with a partial identity or happiness; she searches for her full identity, but in the process she faces a challenge to decide between motherhood and her own identity and unlike her friends who settle for partial identity, she chooses her own solution.

While many critics believe that Chopin is a feminist writer, in her dissertation “An analysis of Kate Chopin and the culture of nineteenth century America” Rochelle Lynn Blatter (1999) believes that Chopin was not a feminist by definition but a woman who was able to defy the 19<sup>th</sup> century American culture and moved away from the

normal themes in the stories and challenged her readers towards something new. Amado Chan criticizes the novel from the psychoanalytic point of view using Freud and Young's theory to support his argument. In his article "A Journey of Self discovery; Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" (1999) Chan argues that in her journey Edna is motivated by her own unconscious, using Freud's theory. All her actions are rooted in her dreams and her childhood's behaviors and he mentions that "in her journey of self-discovery, Edna's unconscious psyche motivates the desire to fulfill her repressed childhood dreams of freedom" (63). Modern critics analyze the novel from a new angle; in 2002 Joyce Dyer published an article entitled "Reading *The Awakening* with Toni Morrison", in which she stated that "many critics who have had the courage to confront the issue of race in *The Awakening* have found evidence that Kate Chopin stereotypes and demeans blacks" (139). At the end she concludes that Chopin knew that there is no freedom in the south for anyone as she asserts:

There can be no freedom—in the South, anywhere in the nation, not in a single heart—without the recognition that black servitude in any form dare not remain. And there can be no artistic freedom without finding a way— perhaps encoded, nuanced, contradictory, and hidden in the shadows of black Americans— to say this. The message is full of danger and the potential for sabotage, but it is vital to the identity of America's history and of American literature itself. The black presence is never on the edges of a text by white writers, because it lives powerfully at the center of the white imagination. The subject of the dream is the dreamer. This is the message Toni Morrison forces us to hear. (152-153)

Harold Bloom's *Novelist and Novels* (2005) has gathered valuable articles on the matter which will be very useful to this research. Kathleen Streater in her article "Adele Ratignolle: Kate Chopin's Feminist at Home" (2007) opens our eyes to other characters that are neglected by critics. In her article, Streater presents a new side of Adele that Chopin wanted her readers to know. Chopin makes Adele a mother-woman figure who uses her feminist identity in the patriarchal society to her advantage. She is a great performer who is able to bring a balance to her life both as a mother and wife and also as an independent passionate woman.

The critical reception of Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* also has many valuable sources such as like: Crewe (1995), Thraikill (2002) and Muller (2012). Most of the critics try to analyze and validate Gilman's views about the oppression upon women; in her article Thraikill's main goal is to support Gilman's claim on her attack on Dr. Mitchell and the effect of the assumed treatment on women.

Gayle Marie Reach in her article "The Naturalistic Dimension of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*" (1989) discusses the conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century women in the face of "uncontrollable forces of nature". She argues, society treats women as the weaker gender in order to control them, but Gilman's protagonist is not ready to be suppressed by the demands of the patriarchal society and she chooses insanity over the patriarchal restrictions.

Jennifer Hudson uses the French theory of *Ecriture feminine* to show how Gilman mediates masculine and feminine discourses in her article "She said, he said: *Ecriture feminine* and the mediation of masculine" (2002). She argues that Gilman

places her protagonist in a situation either to submit to the patriarchal demands or to nourish her own feminine mode. She concludes that the wall of the society and its suppression is too tight for her and that eventually leads her to insanity. The narrator goes on a journey or as Hudson calls it a “cyclical journey” and returns but the result of this journey might be the awareness that people need to realize.

*Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in “The Yellow Wallpaper”* (2004) by Carol Margaret Davison examines the work as a Gothic novel; she makes a comparison between the typical gothic novels with the horrible houses and places and the cold and horror visions of the patriarchal society opposed on women. She maintains that, “the narrator’s complex vision of the horrors of patriarchy in ‘*The Yellow Wallpaper*’ is only matched by the final complex and horrific vision of the senseless and crawling, infantile narrator in a posture that literalizes what she has implied is woman’s position in America” (66).

Carolina Nunez-Puente in her article “The Yellow Hybrids: Gender and Genre in Gilman’s *Wallpaper*” (2012) makes a comparison between male and female society using the imagery of the yellow wallpaper. She argues that Gilman makes a comparison between the patterns of the wallpaper and the patriarchal society, “it is ‘dull’, ‘impertinent[t]’, ‘absurd’, and ‘silly’; it has ‘lame uncertain curves’ and provokes ‘confusion’” (3).

The main concept presented here is “challenge”; both Chopin and Gilman try to challenge the American ideology and the taboo concept of marriage and the relationship