

Patriarchy in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ and *Like Water for Chocolate*

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From time immemorial, the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ have come to be seen as two separate terms. But in actuality, these terms only make sense only as complementary aspects. When they are divided and fragmented, they come to represent certain archetypes that inadvertently shape the patterns of life in real and life in Literature as well. The idea of masculinity, then, comes to be associated with a Patriarchal society in which, women are considered inferior and subjugated to male dominance.

In Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*, though there is no particular male who plays a dominant role, the concept of Patriarchy still exists in the form of society and its laws which relegate a woman to the kitchen and prevent her from the expression of her feelings and emotions. Esquivel’s novel differs in the way she portrays Patriarchy. She converts Mama Elena, a matriarch into the patriarch of the family.

According to Martha J Cutter, ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’ concerns women’s entrapment within patriarchal language. Forbidden to engage in any intellectual activity, the female narrator resorts to covert writing and then, more and more, to “readings” of the yellow wallpaper.

Ultimately these readings reveal a hidden history of feminine suppression ... “I’ve got out at last .

... you can’t put me back” The yellow wallpaper in Gilman’s story comes to represent the restrictions placed on women and their creativity by a patriarchal society. Patriarchy has shaped and continues to shape the lives and writings of women all over the world. But one predominant motif in these works is the refusal of women to just give in to the dominance of a patriarchal order. This may be brought out in different ways but the idea remains the same. This paper will touch upon these themes and many more related to a Patriarchal construct.

FULL PAPER

Patriarchy is a social situation in which men form figures of authorities and women are subjugated to the will of the men. It is a system which has continued to exist in life and thus by default in Literature as well. Virginia Woolf in her essay ‘A Room of One’s Own’ explains the effect that a patriarchal tradition has on the writings of women writers and how women writers need to discard “man’s sentence” (66) and devise one of their own. Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Laura Esquivel are such examples. Not only do they explore the theme of patriarchy in their works, but also subvert the roles that patriarchy has forced on women through ideas and notions of tradition.

Both *Like Water for Chocolate* and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ form similar patterns in many ways. One of the most obvious similarities in both these works is the presence of women characters who seem to take up patriarchal roles during the absence of the male characters. Mama Elena can be seen as a patriarchal figure due to her continuous references to the importance of tradition and her authoritative treatment of Tita. In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, Jennie acts as an extension of her brother John. She continually seems to spy on the protagonist and thus becomes as Sarah Appleton Aguiar says, “a female agent of the patriarchy who works antagonistically against the narrator.” (75) Aguiar basis her argument on the fact that the antagonist in the story is patriarchy and the effect that it has on women.

“Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole.” (Millett 33) With this in mind, it becomes easy to understand that society as a whole functions within a patriarchal construct and that this construct contains within itself the idea of oppression. Seen this way, this concept of patriarchy can be read along with those of rage and redemption in both these works. Tita is oppressed by her mother and her ideas of tradition. That oppression leads her to the brink of madness. The hold that patriarchal society has on her is best heard through her own thoughts – “Now, seeing her hands no longer at her mother's command, she didn't know what to ask them to do, she had never decided for herself before. They could do anything or become anything.” (279) Under Mama Elena and her patriarchal ideals, Tita is assigned certain duties which she performs to the best of her abilities. It is only when she is free of her mother’s influence that she realizes how restrictive they were. Once she is cut off from that society, she understands that her hands could do or become anything. But the fact remains that she does not know what she can and should do. This is the effect of a patriarchal society. It not only restricts but in certain cases like that of Tita’s tends to prevent any kind of positive development.

When realization takes place, anger and rage rears its head. Tita feels the rage as if it is a physical being and is stifled by it – “It was as if Mama Elena’s spit had landed dead-center on a fire that was about to catch and had put it out. Inside [Tita] felt the effects of snuffing the flame; smoke was rising in her throat, tightening into a thick knot and clouding her eyes and making her cry.” – It is only when she banishes Mama Elena from her life with her proclamation of hate that she is truly free and redeemed. The same pattern can be noticed in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ as well. According to Martha J Cutter, ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’ concerns women's entrapment within patriarchal language. Forbidden to engage in any intellectual activity, the female narrator resorts to covert writing and then, more and more, to “readings” of the yellow wallpaper. Ultimately these readings reveal a hidden history of feminine suppression ... “I’ve got out at last . . . you can’t put me back” The yellow wallpaper in Gilman’s

story comes to represent the restrictions placed on women and their creativity by a patriarchal society. John is just one among the many advocates of that society which forces women to “creep.” The most pathetic part of the story lies in the fact that there is no normal escape from those bounds. It either leads to madness or death. (115)

In ‘A Room of One’s Own’, Woolf gives the example of Judith Shakespeare, who she says might have the same genius of Shakespeare but societal and patriarchal laws and traditions will lead her to nothing but an early death.

Paradoxically, even patriarchs are filled with rage. In ‘A Room of One’s Own’, Virginia Woolf tries to explain why - One reason that she thinks is plausible is that when man insisted ‘...emphatically upon the inferiority of women, he was concerned not with their inferiority, but with his own superiority.’(29) This leads us to the other side of the coin – The notion of the “Bitch”

Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* has this dimension to it. Catherine Quick explains - “Certain female figures are labeled “villainesses” because they embody certain characteristics or perform certain actions which potentially threaten the patriarchal construction of the feminine, and thus the construction of the masculine. Tradition, therefore, must portray these women and what they represent as evil in order to undermine any power they might exert over patriarchy.”(440) The best example of this phenomenon would be Mama Elena. She can be viewed as a victim of patriarchy herself rather than a patriarch. She is part of a history of repression and knows no other way but continuing it. When a woman like Mama Elena assumes the role that is generally associated with men, it becomes a threat to the patriarchal set up and she comes to be called a “bitch” because she is consciously or unconsciously threatening and challenging the established order.

Jennie’s character in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ too can be read this way. She becomes an agent of patriarchy not because she wants to but because she herself is a victim of the very system. She is completely dependent on her brother John financially and socially. She is a victim because of this dependence and any movement away from what is expected from her can and will lead to complete ostracism and hence she is forced into her role of antagonist as her own survival depends on it.

“Yet if a woman attempts to eradicate these “traditional” qualities from her psyche in order to avert the patriarchal hostility and instead cultivate the very qualities that the patriarchy prizes in itself—rationality, individuality, competition, and solitary achievement— she is labeled a “bitch.” And then, in a vicious cycle, if she “repents” and pursues the traditional feminine roles and values, patriarchy disdains her as “woman.” Damned if she does; damned if she doesn’t.” (Aguiar 33) This is the position of women in a patriarchal society.

Patriarchy is a system which is based on dominance, power and exploitation. This can be manifest in various ways. The obvious instances in the novel are Mama Elena’s subjugation of Tita. A more covert instance of exploitation is Pedro’s marriage with Rosaura. Pedro, in a calculative and cold manner uses Rosaura to be near Tita because of his self-interest. This seems to be the only instance in the novel in which Pedro shows some strength of will but is otherwise seen as a weak character.

What is interesting to note is that both Esquivel and Gilman have chosen a woman’s turf but have subverted the roles that women play in them. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, it is the women characters who show true strength. Mama Elena in the role of a patriarch is able to save the ranch once. Tita is finally able to confront her hatred for her mother and break free of tradition. In ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, it is the protagonist (narrator) with her “progressively debilitating fantasies of entrapment and liberation” (Kolodny 1130) who is able to triumph over her husband.

What they have successfully proved is what Virginia Woolf says, “It is fatal to be a man or a woman simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.” (89) Too much power and too much oppression can only lead to destruction. Patriarchal society is built on the foundations of power and oppression and unless these foundations are broken down, there can be no development. “This is not to say that, were patriarchy somehow overthrown, the mind would cease to be divided . . . It means simply that these would not be the relations of patriarchy as we know them.” (Mc Gee 107) The only possible solution is change.

Works Cited

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