



Ghosts of Patriarchy: A Study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Giant Wistaria"

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Abstract

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in most of her works, introduces disturbing images and symbols and, in this way, tries to shed light on the suppressed history of the Western patriarchy and the crimes committed against women. The present paper focuses on the underlying patriarchal themes; of patriarchal restriction, of controlled women's sexuality and control on motherhood in the story "The Giant Wistaria" and how, as they become more pronounced, they eventually turn themselves in ghostly forms. With its unfathomable storyline, the present narrative discusses patriarchal oppression in society and families. The severity of the anguish that controlled women experience in this story is supported by the underlying mystery of the narrative. To achieve a number of objectives, the current story is written in a manner reminiscent of traditional gothic narratives, but the present study does not focus on the spooky details of the narrative rather it represents that there is nothing scarier than life under patriarchy.

The story is unveiled into two sections, each of which represents a different temporality, character structure, and language variation. The setting, however, is the same for both sections. The first part acts as an introduction to the second. The plot as discussed in the book "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" and *Selected Stories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, moves around "a hundred years later discovery of the remains of the young mother and her baby by the new inhabitants of the house" (Knight 174). In the essay named "Lady Terrorists: Nineteenth-century American Women Writers and the Ghost Story" it is written that in order to reveal the suppressed history of the Western patriarchy and the atrocities against women, Gilman uses the idea of 'supernaturalism' in the story, because- "Again, and again, women writers found in the supernatural tale metaphors for the unredressed wrongs women have suffered, for the invisibility of women's work, and for women's emotional, social, and political oppression" (Patrick 74). Consequently, "The Giant Wistaria" depicts the ugly side of 'home incarceration' in Western patriarchal society. Barbara Patrick further explains what is particularly significant in women's ghost stories- "There is depiction of the home far from being a safe haven, the home is a place of exhaustion, treachery, and terror" (75).



In the present narrative, women are depicted by their male counterparts as objects because they are required to fulfil certain set social roles such as mothers and wives and at the same time must adhere to men's desires and ideas, which prevent them from developing into independent persons and discovering their own expression. Additionally, as a result of this chauvinist worldview, this paper emphasises on the demise of women in the narration of the current story. The first half of the narrative ends in an English family, where the daughter has just given birth to a baby out of wedlock and her parents are moving to England to avoid any ramifications for their surname. The image of a woman begging her mother to let her hold the child is portrayed- "Give me my child, mother, and then I will be quiet... Art thou a mother and hast no pity on me, a mother? Give me my child!" (Gilman 483). Her father, however, forcibly silences her. On his instructions, she is kept isolated in her bedroom. The young woman, thus, is shown as suppressed, concealed, and oppressed by her own family, most particularly by her ruthless patriarchal father, in this image, which evokes the physical and psychological 'horror' that she goes through. Her captivity is a symbol of how society restricts women's sexuality. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, it is stated that "The exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject" (Butler 262). The wisteria vine, in the house, is also symbolic, since the family carried it with them from the old world, and it is linked to the 'shameful' daughter who is now pregnant with an illicit child in this manner. The illegitimate baby grows in the womb of its mother as the illegitimate wisteria blooms in their house. When the illicit pregnancy of the young woman is discovered, the family gets devastated and humiliated. To avoid embarrassment, they decide to return to England with their daughter in order to conceal this dark unavoidable stigma on their honour. The following statement clarifies the decision of the patriarchal father- "To-morrow the ship is ready, and we return to England" (484).

Regarding the issue, Gilman contends that women are viewed as objects of society that exist solely to uphold societal norms and the paradigms of the patriarchal system, with no reward other than the satisfaction of performing their assigned duties. Gilman compares the patriarchal system, women's oversexualization, and exploitation in a male-dominated culture to animals in her book named *Women and Economics*:

The wild cow is a female. She has healthy calves and milk enough for them; and that is all the femininity she needs. Otherwise than that she is bovine rather than feminine. She is a light, strong, swift, sinewy creature, able to run, jump, and fight, if necessary...She



has become a walking milk-machine, bred and tended to that express end, her value measured in quarts. The secretion of the milk is a maternal function, a sex function. The cow is over-sexed. (43-44)

According to Gilman, society has turned the cow into a milking machine by using her capacity as a mother for economic gain by breeding them solely for that particular use. She elucidates that this process is parallel to women's suppression to the functions of domesticated wives, child-bearers, and housekeeping, urging them to advance "sex-functions alone" (75). She interprets nineteenth century culture as believing that women are not considered to be fully human beings capable of making their own judgments about their very own bodies. Additionally, they are forbidden from participating in social activities and from expressing their opinions.

The present narrative through its eerie atmosphere, as discussed in the book *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*, shows "Women suffering from the institutions, they feel to be profoundly alienated to them and their concerns" comprising "the patriarchal family, the patriarchal marriage and a patriarchal class, legal, educational, and economic system" (DeLamotte 152). Through the veil of 'supernaturalism,' Gilman also presents "the existence of terror within the sphere of domesticity" (152). Through this narrative, "the readers experience the true menace prevailed in the patriarchal society during that era" which is associated with "the subjugation and violence against women along with deprivation of the women from true knowledge and power" (269). The author uses the idea of captivity to create people that are continually looking for their own identities. In this path, they oscillate between reality and fantasy, sanity and madness, innocence and adulthood's uncorruptible sexuality, and life and death. The narrative depicts the resurrection of dead bodies as a kind of vengeance against "the oppressions of patriarchal society" (Knight 176). A blurred line "between the dead and alive represents the ambiguity between the reality and the fiction, including depiction of dead bodies reemerging from the grave indicates the hidden desire to free from the repression of the patriarchal power" (176). In the physical description of the woman in the first part of the narrative, the author distinctly specifies a red 'cross' around her neck only to identify her as a sinner "The style of Traditional Gothic writer Nathaniel Hawthorne...by specifically mentioning this necklace and other linguistic elements is followed" (185).



Gilman focuses on different issues regarding the female section of the society in most of her works, “The resistance of females to social changes and the incomprehensibility of their male counterpart in regard to significance of love and work in a woman’s life” (191). Her writings reflect her desire for a society that is equal and in which the transition from the present to the future helps the simultaneous processes of women’s empowerment and renunciation of the oppressive power structure that exists within society as a whole. In a particular upsetting section of the current story, the father explains that since no one is aware of the details of the family’s stay in America, they can avoid embarrassment by marrying their daughter to a relative. He is unaffected by the potential of seeing his daughter suffer; what matters is that the family’s reputation is upheld. Even the mother is too coward to challenge her husband’s authority and wishes. The patriarchal father utters the cruel words “Art thou mad, woman?... What other hope for her than a new life to cover the old? Let her have an honest child, an’ she so longeth for one!” (Gilman 484). The ‘American dream’ that the family desired cannot happen now as “their dream was shattered with the pregnancy of their shameful daughter and the birth of the illegitimate child (Scharnhorst, “The Yellow Wallpaper” 125). As a result, the first half can be seen as an indication of women’s quieting in colonial America. It can also be associated with America’s rebirth as “the nation eagerly has strived to maintain its old values in the new colonial world formed by the colonizers (131). The final image that appears at the end of “The Giant Wistaria” is that of the wistaria vine “Overhead the shadows flickered mockingly across a white face among the leaves, with eyes of wasted fire” (Gilman 484).

The second section begins with a group of young people who decide to spend the summer together at a ‘haunted colonial mansion.’ As one of them utters- “Be still, Jim! I believe in Jenny’s ghost as much as she does...Just look at this great Wistaria turn crawling up by the steps here! It looks for all the world like a writhing body – cringing – beseeching!” (482). The wistaria vine in front of the home adds to its unsettling appearance and seems to be hiding something with its smothering tentacles. The young generation couple cannot explain the haunting nightmares and ghost encounters while not believing in supernatural elements. Male characters challenge it with logical defences that highlight their practicality. The following line defines their rationality by interlacing with humour “Well, nothing happened. Only she wasn’t there! May have been indigestion, of course, but as a physician I don’t advise anyone to court indigestion alone at midnight in a cellar!” (483).



A key link between the two sections of the plot is provided by the mansion. The house's small elements, like the rusting gate and the untamed maze of twisted plants, show the passage of time. The story of the mansion draws a lovely comparison between the past and the present. The wistaria vine on the porch has become so enormous that it now completely encircles the front of the house. The giant wisteria "ran along the eaves, holding up the gutter that had once supported it; it shaded every window with heavy green...fragrant blossoms made a waving sheet of purple from roof to ground" (485). During the day, the mansion does not seem to be menacing or frightening; rather, it looks abandoned and wild. During their initial inspection of the house, these young newlyweds find a cradle in one of the rooms. Like the wisteria, it seems to be a clear reminder of the family that resided in the home a hundred years ago. Jenny, a creative woman, goes to the person who looks after the property to ask for proof of any ghosts that might be there. Although their spouses make fun of them, George and her sister back her views. They try to find 'logical answers' even after the initial encounter with the ghost. As George mentions "Well, nothing happened. Only she wasn't there! May have been indigestion, of course, but as a physician I don't advise anyone to court indigestion alone at midnight in a cellar!" (487).

The shocking discovery of a woman and a baby's bodies is disclosed towards the conclusion of the tale, but the young couples who are currently living in the house and the rest of the world remain 'unaware' of the fact. According to many literary critics, the incident links to the tragic ending of these characters as discussed in the essay, "Écriture et Trauma Dans "The Giant Wistaria:" Quand Charlotte Perkins Gilman Revisite Le Gothique"- The trauma remained in the memory as the young couples left the mansion as their summer vacation ended" (Levy 112). Even though the tragedy is still there in the house, the smothering 'Giant Wistaria' has managed to conceal the suffering. Under the guise of gothic, the story is advertised as an ominous depiction of colonial America where women were sexually oppressed and subject to subjugation. Despite living in the modern world, the men treat the women virtually exactly the same way and expect them to stay submissive. Gilman, according to the essay "Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in "The Yellow Wallpaper," here, sketches the male characters as incomprehensible to the feelings of women as "The women were scoffed and teased by the males for their imagination and strange interest" (Davison 74).

The severity of patriarchal conventions when they are broken is accurately depicted in "The Giant Wistaria" by a woman who defies them. The dialogue between an anonymous



woman and her father at the beginning of the story is accentuated by the father's embarrassment and rage since, in the eyes of society, the woman's actions dishonoured her family. She aspires to parent a child who was born outside of wedlock. For Samuel, the patriarchal father, it signifies that "She hath already lost what is more than life" (Gilman 168), signifying that preserving their virginity remains over women's lives as it is their only assurance to get married and therefore, to have a man who delivers them their economic requirements. This condition precedes Samuel to indulge her daughter to abandon her baby behind and agree to take a forced marriage to suppress her failure, as he extracts, "He maketh an honest woman of her, and saveth our house from open shame. What other hope for her than a new life to cover the old?" (168). In this way, he relies on the reality that only a male could make her into a legitimate wife, hiding the humiliation that it could entail breaking patriarchal norms. This would restore women's legitimacy and truthfulness in the social realm. The mother of the unidentified character also exemplifies how men are superior and have authority over women's bodies. She initially appears to support her husband's choice, but she ultimately tries to minimise it. She asks him, "Thou art very hard, Samuel, art thou not afeard for her life? She grieveth sore for the child, aye, and for the green fields to walk in!" (168). In fact, it may be argued that she eventually makes an effort to understand her daughter's choice because, as her daughter has noted, she is a mother herself. Therefore, due to her husband's harshness and patriarchal norms, she would not only lose her daughter's baby but also her own children.

The current narrative thus carries the abuse and domestic incarceration of a female character by a male figure that reflects patriarchal violence. It represents the repression of women in a male-controlled society and in that way raising the radical questions of gender roles. The narrative of "The Giant Wisteria" acquaints one with not only patriarchal repression of colonial America but also with psychological complexities, like claustrophobia diagnosed as hysteria in those days as a normal entity. Instead of providing proper treatment "The women were silenced and discouraged from activities to push back them to the domestic imprisonment" (Scharnhorst 141). The patriarchal society depicted by Gilman in both of these storylines is characterised by sexual repression and a lack of knowledge and authority. The force of feminine sexuality taking over and demolishing the patriarchy is symbolised by the rampant growth of wisteria and the pulling of the pillars from their foundation. Further, "Gilman tries to depict the strong force of the nature gulping, not only the entire house, but also the very roots of the patriarchal society to establish the female's own voice and sexual



freedom in the society” (Knight 178). The narrative highlights the negative effects of living in a chauvinistic culture, which prevents women from being autonomous persons with free expression and will and instead confines them to social positions such as housewives and domestic servants. It is evident from the narrative under study that patriarchal society has a significant role in the demise of women, whether by causing women to conform to the status quo or by putting an end to their lives, as in the instance of “The Giant Wistaria.” Women are also viewed as commodities for the needs and achievements of men in the domestic sphere, and are validated primarily for how they behave and comply to social norms.

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