

## Literature, Idea and the Feminist Consciousness in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's The Yellow Wall-Paper

Okwudiri Anasiudu<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Aligarh Muslim University, India

\*Correspondence: [okwudiri.anasiudu@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:okwudiri.anasiudu@uniport.edu.ng)

### ABSTRACT

*Literature reproduces social realities. These realities are furnished through ideas and form in the service of a society and every of its moments and events in history. Drawing from the foregoing proposition, this study explores the connection between literature, idea, and the feminist consciousness in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" in order to demonstrate Gilman's foregrounding of the challenge of a married woman. This study notes that Gilman's portrayal re-echoes the challenges of contemporary women against the exertions of patriarchy, and the denial of the female voice and agency in marital space. Gilman underscores her theme through specific narrative strategies such as the creation of a cognitively active and questioning female character; who is prevented from exercising her artistic abilities and whose agency is stifled as a house wife without a name in contrast to her husband Dr. John. Another strategy is through the use of symbols such as the yellow wall paper to allegorize the female condition in marital sphere in the similitude of a prison and a caged existence. Importantly, while this paper locates the society as an important source of inspiration for the feminist idea manifest in "The Yellow Wall-Paper", this paper submits that Gilman makes a demand for social change, and her short story constitutes a type of resistance to the narrative framing of women in domestic sphere by men, institution, authorities and orthodoxies as marginal and subalterns.*

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Published June 30<sup>th</sup> 2022



### KEYWORDS

Literature, Idea, The Yellow Wall-Paper, Feminism, Consciousness

### ARTICLE LICENCE

© 2022 Universitas Hasanuddin Under the license CC BY-SA 4.0



### 1. Introduction

Where does the idea in literary works emanate from and what purpose does it serve? Is it simply for the fabrication of literary genres, techniques and style? Is idea in literature a metaphysical abstraction with which critics engage in speculative exercises in order to titillate themselves for intellectual pleasure – valorising jouissance? Is the idea in literature without a sociological and political implication and distance from the everyday lives and plight of women?

For the Formalist, an idea is immanent within the literary work or text. But from a sociological functionalist purview, the idea contained in a text draws its inspiration from the society and serves the purpose of social transformation. And whereas there was a time in literary criticism where the ideas in a literary work were distanced from history and real human society, with greater attention focused on textuality, contemporary "Criticism can no longer cooperate in or pretend to ignore this enterprise" (*The World, the Text, and the Critic* 5-6), that is, to overlook the overlapping relationship between literature, society and idea. This is because idea is a catalyst which instigates social change, as it humanizes, enlightens and instigates critical thinking. Thus, the position of this paper is that to dissociate the idea in a work of literature from real human society, not minding its "fictionality", is to remove, or detach literature from its umbilical cord.

### 2. The Writer, Literary Ideas and Criticism

Literary ideas portray an author's socio-political position or standpoint concerning the society which the author is a part of and not a stranger. Nonetheless, it is through the practice of literary criticism and the engagement with a literary theory that the ideas in literature are unveiled from a given perspective or position. This type of criticism or engagement must not be a "distinterested" process but a criticism totally commitment to the interpretation of literature for the good of the society, with the writer as the artisan and the text as a sociological product and medium. Thus, while idea may speak of, in a general sense, as that which imbricates literary imagination, ideas are implicated by the author's response to social issues which the writer is commitment to, that is, "the pursuing tendencies" of a writer (Walter Benjamin 86).

The idea in a work of literature is infused therein by the writer in the service of a given sociological purpose, task, or commitment. It points to the author's social participation via literary production. Such that just as individuals participate in political processes through election, a writer indirectly participates in nation building and social reconstruction through literary engagement through the production of idea fabricated as texts. Importantly, a writer infuses an idea into literature in order to stimulate human reasoning, awake human consciousness towards "the pressing political concerns of contemporary societies" (Bill Ashcroft and Paul Ahluwalia 28).

The foregoing gives credence to the position of the French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre in his speculative enquiry on the nature of literature. Sartre explains that "literature should not be a sedative but an irritant, a catalyst provoking men to change the world in which they live and in so doing change themselves (*What is Literature?* xi). Underscored in Sartre's assertion is the capacity of the idea in literature to instigate change. But change to what end? The kind of change the idea contained in literature instigates should be for the social good. And an idea in literature may be a response to a particular social issue in order to change it within a local context, however, such social issue may have a universal presence. Take for example, the issue of female subjugation and denial of voice in marital spaces. This is why social change or transformation is one of the utilitarian value of literature and idea.

An important question we must not fail to ask is, how does literature imitate, animate, imitate, project or make an idea come alive? In answering this question, we must note that literature is a poor imitation of the ideas it projects. The reason is because literature does not make the idea it intends or seeks to communicate plain. A literary idea is communicated through a complex semiological process of meaning creation such as: metaphor, allegory, irony, innuendo, symbols and carnivalesque conveyed through language, characterisation, technique or style. A literary idea is not something you just see on the surface of a text, it does not wait in a literary work for one to come and take it. It is veiled or cloaked and because of the capacity of patterns of representation to generate more than one semantic possibilities, the representation of an idea in literature is prone to creating "ambiguity" (*Literary Theory and Criticism an Introduction* 10-11). To solve this problem, one must develop a critical understanding of what is literature, drawing from a critical approach and acumen to enable one digest and interpret those cloaked ideas hidden in literature without a bias.

Making sense of the idea in a text is not without a measure of selective bias and sentiment. By selective bias and sentiment, we mean the deliberate act of ignoring other issues in a work of literature, in order to explore that issue which the critic has set out to interpret. In such situation, the critic takes a position to ignore other issues. It is this position to ignore that becomes a selective bias. This is the outcome of a reader or critic's "political positioning" (*Literary Theory and the Claim of History* 29)

Even the term literature is not without its contradictions, defying a consensus in terms of definition. It could be seen as a fictional and imaginative writing such as poetry, prose and plays (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 152); "an organized violence committed on ordinary speech" (quoted in *Literary Theory an Introduction*, 2); as something which is unstable, based on human ways of reading a text (*Literary Theory an Introduction* 11); a "realized performance" (*Literary Theory and Criticism an Introduction* 18); and as something creative and also an art (*Literary Theory* 15). Five deductions we can draw from the submissions are: (1) literature entails language, (2) literature entails fictionalized truth, (3) it entails subjective interpretation, (4) it is like every other form of art, since it entails imagination, but it is different in terms of language use (5), it entails a kind of "performance" or action. What has made literature take the foregoing explanation is the nature of that which it projects, that is, ideas. For even though an idea may be experiential and drawn from everyday social life, it exists in abstract forms, that is, an idea exists in ethereal forms in the human mind, and it floats in the human consciousness. This is why literature is an "idea wrapped in form" (*Literary Theory* 110). This is similar to what Aristotle in the *Poetics* sees as "medium" (3). No matter the form an idea assumes, every idea is capable of shaping the world. For instance, the ideas which have shaped human history and society such as capitalism, socialism, democracy, evolution, existentialism and the debate on reality, the futility and dilemma of human life evident in the issues raised in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For the fact that literature can capture ideas and philosophical debates, it serves as "a document in the history of ideas and philosophy" (*Literary Theory* 111). Literature can therefore be seen as a handmaid, which provides ideas with a garment to assume a form for the purpose of defining how humans see and engage the world or make sense of it.

For the fact that a literary idea is abstract, it requires that a reader should approach a text with a critical attitude in order to be able to unearth the "leading idea" contained therein. This is because without a leading idea, literature is useless and dead. A leading idea imbues literature with life. What this suggests is that not all ideas in a work of literature are focal. A leading idea manifest as philosophical, sociological, cultural, phenomenological, and even metaphysical theme and subject matter.

We see this in the works of Chinua Achebe, where he stressed the idea of cultural change, anti-colonialism and cultural nationalism in *Things Fall Apart*. We also see how ideas are reflected in Ola Rotimi's *Onvonrawein Nogbaisi*, to communicate historical consciousness, and in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *Mister Johnson* by Joyce Cary which reflect, though subtly, the idea of euro-western expansionism and imperialism. Important ideas in African metaphysics and epistemology which African literature has explored include: the idea of Abiku or reincarnation which speaks of the transcendence of life depicted as the Abiku myth as evident in Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name*; Ben Okri's *Famished Road*, Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*. There is also the concept of the Chi or the kindred spirit which finds expression in the creative art of the Igbo people, particularly in their myth, their legend, their allegory, their poetry, prose and drama and the "Nwa-boy" or the Igbo entrepreneurship mentorship system among others.

To demonstrate how literature engenders leading idea in this study, we will explore for the purpose of practical analysis, the idea of feminist consciousness raising to the negative essentialism of women in domestic space. The basic assumption of this study is that women across cultures have been subjugated and denied a voice and presence in history and narrative within marital sphere. Charlotte Perkins Gilman projects this idea of consciousness in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" through her theme, and the deployment of a unique style and technique.

### 3. The Image of Women in History and Discourse

Prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, before contemporary women's right movements began, the condition and social status of women across the globe was in a state that women are denied social, economic, and political inclusion. Prejudice and obnoxious cultural practices which objectified women were common place. Through patriarchal exertions, men had hegemony over the voice, identity, body, sexuality, existence and narrative about women even though few women occupied prestigious positions in history. This did not translate into real agency for women as such status only served the purpose of patriarchy.

An example we can draw from the Persian tradition is the story of Queen Vashti and King Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes 1) in the book of Esther. Queen Vashti was deposed and banished from her queen-ship because she refused to come before King Ahasuerus and display her beauty before the king, his nobles and princes. Vashti's banishment is a consequence of her refusal to appear before the king and his nobles and princes who were all men. Ahasuerus' adviser (Memucan) also gave impetus to her banishment as he tells king Ahasuerus that Vashti's act is an insult, not to the king alone but also to every man in Persia, this is in spite of the fact that Vashti's opinion on the issue was not heard. She was not given a fair hearing before her judges who were all male. Not only in the Middle East, where the Vashti story is situated is the image of a woman negatively essentialized, such perception thrives in Africa too, such that: the woman has to fit into the specified societal or familial category, and that identification determines her roles. The major common features among these categories of femininity are subservience, docility, acquiescence, (sometimes) invisibility, muteness, etc. Essentially, these categories of femininity are always present during very (sic) epoch of human development, especially in Africa. (*The Feminine Ontology and the African Reality...11*)

Even till the present time, in most places like Northern Nigeria, Lybia, and Niger republic; women are forced into marriage, and a good number of them are denied formal education, a calculated attempt to make women remain ignorant and cognitively disempowered. Within Europe, an example we can draw from is evident in the thought of Aristotle. Aristotle portrays women as second fiddles, lacking the ability for courage or cleverness (*Poetics* 24). Another instance is during the Victorian era which denies women in Europe a name or status outside marriage. And even in a marriage context a woman's sense of identity or social mobility is through the name of a husband. For according to Charles Petrie, the functions of women at this time were solely for marriage (199-200).

Also, extant scholarship shows that religion, social anthropology and literature have not been fair in depicting the image of women. According to Petrie, religion always blamed women as the cause of the fall of man, as the likes of Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine portray women as imperfect and weak creatures (*Literary Theory: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* 181). On the other hand, Charles Darwin, the renowned social anthropologist had argued that in terms of mental capacity, women are of a lower class of civilization and with lesser mental power than men (*Descent of Man n.p*)

The Egyptian scholar: Nawal El Saadawi notes also that even Leo Tolstoy with his towering literary status depicts women as instruments of the devil, and stupid, while Satan lends her his head when she acts in his orders ("The Heroine in Arab Literature" 520). Such assumptions are some of the motivations leading to the need for women emancipation. Thus, when the idea of contemporary feminism began to take form, it assumed a de-constructive approach as it came with a new way of thinking and seeing things. Cultural practices were re-visited and questioned anew. This was what enabled Mary Wollstonecraft to ask, "Why should we [women] be kept in ignorance (*A Vindication of the Right of Women* 49).

Importantly, it is noteworthy that women emancipation, which is usually couched in the appellation feminism does not advocate for a separate society for women, but it does challenge structures or those leading ideas which tend to put women in conditions of inferiority (*Literary Theory and Criticism an Introduction* 185-186).

Several women have played pivotal roles as pioneers in the championing of the idea of women emancipation and female activism through their writings. Examples are: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Right of Women* in 1792; Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteen Century* in 1869; Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in 1929; Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949; Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in 1960; Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* in 1968; Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* in 1980 etc. The task of these women is singular and clear, as they seek to raise consciousness to the plight and condition of women (*Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* 84).

The foregoing women began to emerge from the changes which came as a result of 18<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution such as the division of labour. But men were adamant at that time to allow women add their labour or cognitive input to the economic sphere of society, instead in their role as domestic house-wives and as servants, house-helps, or nannies ("The Waste of Private House Keeping", 36-38). Such disposition towards women serves as a tool of subordination of women by men (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 94).

It is against such background that Gilman wrote the "The Yellow Wall-Paper". Gilman's short story is a counter-discourse to patriarchy. She portrayed the humanity of women as transcending mere objects or reification. Gilman's story recreates the nature of bondage many women in her time in Europe were into; and by extension, the plight of many married women globally.

#### **4. Background to the "The Yellow Wall-Paper"**

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is particularly significant for her conceptualization of gender and excessive sex distinction in sociology (*Sociological Theory* 444). As an American feminist and writer, her seminal work: *Women and Economics* is a feminist classic. Gilman experienced a post-partum depression which made her seek professional help from Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, a neurologist and specialist in women's nervous disorder. Dr. Weir confined her to bed rest and never to write, paint, or draw again: to live a domestic life.

Gilman suffered from breast cancer which made her conclude that her productive life was over, so she commits suicide with chloroform which she has been accumulating. In an essay, "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wall-Paper?" she recounts her motivation for writing "The Yellow Wall-Paper", thus:

For many years, I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond. During the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith and some faint stir of hope, to a noted specialist in nervous diseases, the best known in the country. This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to, "have but two hours; intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as I Lived." This was in 1887. ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 669-670)

Gilman obeyed the doctor's instruction but her condition was aggravated, thus she disobeys the doctor's instruction and goes back to writing, painting and drawing. The reason being that not working or engaging in the things she has a passion for, denies her the right of being a human, or a responsible adult who has to work, and be productive. Also, work confers on one a measure of power, a kind of "sweat equity". Gilman notes that Dr. Mitchell later read her short story: "The Yellow Wall Paper" and changed the method of his treatment of neurasthenia.

##### **4.1 The Idea in "The Yellow Wall-Paper": Telling "Her-story" and Not "His-story"**

The idea fabricated in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is the issue of female dehumanization, denial of voice and intellect. This is portrayed through the story of a woman who is creative and imaginative but is prevented from using her talent by the society and her husband. At an autobiographical level, it is an account of Gilman's experience with depression. At the sociological level it portrays the stifling nature of the human society, to the creativity of women generally. The story addresses the issue of female denial of voice and cognitive participation. For the female protagonist, the stifling of her creativity leads her to neurosis, a form of madness because the society and her husband do not expect her to be talented and creative.

The story is written in the first person view point, in form of a diary and the protagonist, a woman is married to John, a physician. John rents an old mansion for the summer but the woman sees the mansion as gothic. There are several rooms in the mansion but the couple move to an upstairs nursery with several windows.

The unnamed woman is diagnosed as sick of depression, and for her treatment, she is forbidden to work (write) but encouraged to eat well and get plenty of exercise and air. Also, the husband and the doctor warned her against engaging in creative activities, because it is the cause of the ailment. So, she hides her journal from her husband where she writes her ideas and thoughts. In her room upstairs (ironically, a nursery), several events unfold. She begins to hallucinate and see images and patterns on a yellow wall paper hung on the room, until she comes to believe that there is a woman who is caged and she creeps behind the wall paper, so she must set the woman free. This makes her strip the wall paper off from the wall. On the last day of the summer, she locks herself in her room and refuses to unlock the door or let her husband to come in. When her husband returns with the key he finds his wife creeping around the room, and touching the wall paper. Then she exclaims "I've got out at last, In spite of you (John) and Jane.

One of the leading ideas in the "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is the need for women emancipation. It is captured in the following lines and action and they are very symbolic of women's attempt to emancipate themselves from the chains of tradition and patriarchal exertion, "I **pulled** and she **shook**. I **shook** and she **pulled**, and before morning we had **peeled** off yards of that paper" ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 667). Another example is "I've **got out** at last," said I, "in spite of you [John] and Jane! and you cannot put me back." (*Norton Anthology of American Literature* 669). We need to pay attention to the functions of the verbs used in the above expression by the woman, notably: **shook**, **pulled**, **peeled** and **got out**. They serve a perlocutionary function, indicating the force and struggle, the effort of the female character to free the woman in the yellow wall paper which symbolically speaks of women attempts for emancipation. The implication of these actions is that it underscores the fact that female emancipation does not come "on a platter of gold", but that women have to fight for it to earn it.

There are four types of women represented in the narrative. The first is the writer: Charlotte Perkin Gilman, who uses the narrative to reflect her sub-consciousness or repressed desires through writing. This repression manifests in terms of her writing about herself. It also underscores the relationship between a narrative and the repressed desire in the unconscious as this repressed desire could manifest occasionally in form of syntactic structures. This means that the language use of a person whose desires are repressed can actually reveal something about the nature of the person's repression. For Gilman, the narrative or short story becomes an outlet for the expression of her repressed desire which for the wife of John entails a desire for freedom, emancipation from the shackles of patriarchy. The story also serves as an act of pulling down the strong holds of patriarchy in order to enable women regain agency.

The second woman symbolized in the narrative is the wife of John who uses her own writing evident in the diary to express her liberation or resistance. While the third woman is the metaphysical woman in the wall paper, who was pulled out by the wife of John, then there is the extended metaphor associated with all of these aforementioned three women, which is the fact that they serve as a symbol of the collective experience or bondage women all over the world experience because of the patriarchal cultural system which John and Dr. Weir serve as a symbolic representation. We must be conscious of the fact that; what women are to be emancipated from in the narrative is the patriarchal system and ideology. By patriarchy, we mean the ideology which seek to enthrone men in position of power by dehumanizing women.

The word "patriarchy" comes from the Latin word "pater", which means "father", and it speaks of the hegemonic political power and authority of a male in a society such that narratives and social standards are woven around masculinity as the standard while femininity is portrayed as weak and inferior. Patriarchy also refers to the power of fathers within families. A society is considered patriarchal when men establish or inherit a social order where they dominate positions of power and authority or when important achievements and historical events are attributed to the actions of men, alone. The character John and Dr. Weir Mitchel allegorizes the patriarchal system and ideology.

What is given prominence in the narrative is the idea of rebellion or resistance against the established order or patriarchy. The symbolic act of rebellion or resistance culminates into madness for the wife of John. This is well captured in the text as she creeps round the room and makes the following utterance "I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path. I do not want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in... I want to astonish him" ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 668). In another instance we see this rebellious feeling manifesting as anger. "I am getting angry enough to do something desperate" ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 668). These actions represent a feminist sensibility and consciousness raising strategy as John's wife refuses to allow herself to be taken for granted anymore, by her husband, or Jane and the society at large.

Also immanent in the "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is a contrast in terms of representation of the wife of John, in the opening of the narrative she is portrayed as a wife who is passive and obedient, not willing to offend the system or question the rationale behind the supposedly caring or loving statements of John her husband or Dr. Weir Mitchel. She assumes

this gender attitude and role because this is what the society wants from her, to be seen and not heard. But at the later part of the text, we see a new consciousness, a new awareness which shows the emergence of a new assertive female subject who has claimed her subjectivity by force.

Her feminist consciousness or agency manifests in the following actions: her refusal to open the door for John her husband, it is also evident in the symbolic action of tearing to shred the wall paper, and her refusal to stop writing or to stop her creative engagement against the instructions of Dr. Weir and her husband. Within her, she comes to that knowing, a kind of consciousness that her actions announce a new beginning of self-awareness as she notes that, "I know so well enough that a step like this is improper and might be misconstrued" ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 68) And this has been the attitude of the society towards actions by women, as women's pursuit for agency is seen as improper, misconstrued, deviant or rebellious.

Gilman, through this short story projects the idea that women should not be cognitively restricted and treated as incapable of agency in a marriage situation. That Gilman portrays marriage in this light, does not imply that Gilman is against marriage, but against the kind of marriage depicted in the narrative, which no doubt signifies bondage. Such marriage, between John and his wife is contracted on the basis of inequality, where the man is seen as the supreme, infallible ruler, lord of the manor, while the woman is the serf, the servant and the subaltern. Such kind of marriage dries up the essence of the female humanity and it stifles her creative ability by hiding her from existence. This reduces the woman to an object, a shadow of the male. It is this situation that pushes the wife of John to depression and finally insanity as she cannot imagine a life where she is denied agency or not allowed to engage in her writing.

The wife of John suffers, but John is never aware of it. John's wife, who also doubles as the female protagonist knows that creative activities like writing gives her a voice and an existence of her own which her husband and the patriarchal society want to steal from her. For example, John hates to see her write, "for he hates to see me write a word" ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 659). And it is obvious that John and the patriarchal system portrayed in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" makes her appear as if her creativity is a disease, a curse. John's wife notes that "he says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine will sure lead to all manner of exciting fancies, and that I ought to sue my will and good sense to check the tendency" ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 660)

There are several linguistic or rhetorical strategies employed by the writer in the narrative. A noticeable one is the absence of a name for the protagonist (the wife of John). This strategy is a feminist aesthetic design as it achieves more than one purpose. First, it speaks of the delegitimation, or the denial of the humanity or identity of John's wife and in the absence of her name, her real name, she bears the name of her husband. It also serves a paradigmatic reference role as it projects a central image which is that of a woman and this woman could be any woman. We should also note that giving something a name or a label closes up such a thing and makes it a tool for stereotype but the author chooses to create a protagonist in the first person pronoun "I". This pronoun serves as an addresser within the framework of Roman Jakobson's functions of language and this addresser is assertive and also existential, because of her capacity to make choices which we see at the end of the writing. Another linguistic device or style is the use of the present and past tense in the narrative, which situate the text as ever present and also relevant in the now and in the future but drawing its insights from incidents from the past.

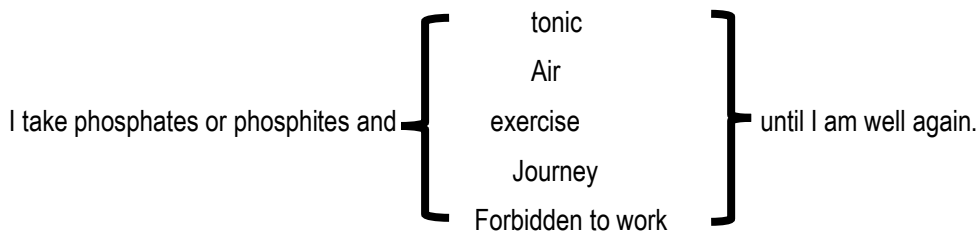
The present tense shows that the woman as a being exists, is observant and a conscious being unlike the sisters of her husband John who wear and assume the normal, passive and conditioned role of the "good woman" in the patriarchal imagination as we see in the observation of the existential protagonist that "Jennie [John's sister] is the perfect, and enthusiastic house keeper and hopes for no better profession" ("The Yellow Wall-Paper" 661). John's wife, the nameless protagonist is of the view that Jennie thinks that it is the writing she engages in that makes her sick. The past tense deployed in the narrative helps the reader to connect with events which occurred earlier in the text, in order to give the reader a clue to what John's wife went through as a woman.

The dominant technique, narrative pattern or method in which the writer creates the story and idea is impressionism. It originated in France in the late 19th century. Impressionists were considered radical in their time because they broke many of the rules of formalism in art, set by earlier generations. They also drew many of their topic of discourse from life or society. Instead of writing an ideal story of women which has the leitmotif of a happy-ever-after, the impressionist writer like Gilman creates what she sees at a given moment, capturing a fresh, original vision of the bondage of women symbolized by the wall paper. Impressionists often engage in automatic writing, rather than writing from a template. We see this automatic writing in the woman, the wife of John who has a diary to capture her senses. As an impressionist, Gilman observes nature and society more directly and sets its down in its most fleeting aspects—especially the changing

light of the sun on the yellow wall paper. Gilman simplified her compositions, by omitting detail in order to achieve a striking overall effect, as she moves the focus of the narrative from the real, and visible to the invisible and feelings: from the immediacy of the narrative about John to the woman caged in the yellow wall paper. The use of impressionist images is evident in the description of the wall paper as something that lacks a sequence, has a yellow smell, it makes her dizzy, with its hideous colour and there is a woman behind it creeping in spite of its torturing pattern which changes as the light changes. Ironically, the woman in the yellow wall paper has bars and the woman is behind the bars. The woman in the wall paper changes from one to many women represented as “heads”, then to one again and it is difficult for them to scale through the bar, as the bar strangles them and their eyes turn white (“The Yellow Wall-Paper” 666).

Another strategy employed to communicate the idea of female subjugation in the text is the use of the rhetorical questions: “you see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?” (“The Yellow Wall-Paper” 658). This technique allows the reader to also participate in the thought flow of the narrative; in order to expose the irony inherent in the story. This is because, John is a physician, but he does not believe that his wife is sick. This places John’s qualification as a medical doctor in a bracket and also, it shows that the plight of women, whom the wife of John represents is invisible to the male.

The use of dash shows a break in thought, and communication sequence. Example, “so I take phosphates or phosphites —whichever it is— and tonic, and air, and exercise and journey and am absolutely forbidden to “work” until I am well again” (“Yellow Wall Paper” 658). There is the use of climatic sequence. Where the idea or thought moves from the less important issue to the most important issue as shown below in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (658).



The climax of the technique is subsumed in the use of images and symbols. Examples are: The **colonial mansion**: this mansion is a representation of Victorianism, an era in human history where women are seen as object and without a status outside a man. The yellow **wall paper** is also a symbol which represents the state of mind of the wife of John. It reveals or mirrors her repressed desire and also her bondage as a woman and her yearning for freedom from the oppressive nature of patriarchal system. Another powerful symbol is the **fourth of July**. This is symbolic in that it is the Independence Day, the most important national holiday in the United States. It commemorates the formal adoption of the Declaration of Independence by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At the level of symbol, it also means a day of emancipation for the woman, the wife of John. **The moon** symbolizes hope, desire, and patience. It also reveals the state of women. During the day, the wife of John is passive, but at night she is active like the moon. There is also the use of allusion, from the bible, for example “The wall paper, as I said before is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother (“The Yellow Wall-Paper” 661) in allusion to Proverb 18:24.

Since the time of Gilman, a lot has changed concerning the woman in many societies across the globe. But it is not yet “Uhuru”. The need to continue to spread the idea of emancipation is still very urgent. This is because there are still practices in Africa or Asia that make the woman a captive such: as honour killing, rape, early child marriage, wife inheritance, or female genital mutilation etc. Other related text where the woman’s creativity is stifled and treated as a mere object in a marriage setting and as a being that should be seen while her cognitive processes are stifled is evident in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll House*. Like “The Yellow Wall-Paper”, *A Doll House* depicts the portrayal of women as lacking autonomy, without subjectivity and agency.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, literature is portrayed as a conveyor of idea, and this idea draws from the society. It is through an ethical and committed criticism that such ideas can be unveiled to show their social signification, which crystalizes as the idea of female subjugation and the need for emancipation in “The Yellow Wall-Paper”. This study shows that the background or motivation behind the need for female emancipation is premised on the ground that patriarchal exertion and hegemony stifle women’s subjectivity. This study also offers a brief historical sketch of various women that have played significant roles in the pioneering process of placing at the fore in literary discourse, the condition of women and the need for consciousness raising. Another important concern which this study shows is the aesthetic design in terms of techniques

and style Gilman employs to communicate her unique artistic vision and idea of feminist consciousness. From the background to the study, it is evident that there are elements of the author's personal life reflected in the text and also elements of fictions too, like the wall paper changing its colour. These features situate the text as "faction", a blend of fact and fiction. On the overall, the short story is an engaging read and it shows that a writer and his society are in close relation and it is the burden of responsibility on the writer to deploy literature as a tool for social change such as Gilman has achieved in *The Yellow Wall-Paper*.

## References

- Abrams, M.H. (2005). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Eight Edition. Thomson & Wadsworth.
- Aristotle.(1996). *Poetics*. Trans. Malcom Heath. Penguin Books.
- Ashcroft, Bill, & Pal Ahluwalia. (1999) *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Edward Said*. 2 Edition. Routledge.
- Baym, Nina. (1979) *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Fifth Edition, Vol. 2. Norton and Company Inc.
- Bressler, Charles. (1994) *Literary Theory: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Prentice Inc.
- Darwin, Charles. (1999, November 28) *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. The Project Gutenberg Ebook.
- Eagleton, Terry. (2008) *Literary Theory An Introduction An Anniversary Edition*. Blackwell Publishing.
- George, Ritzer & Jeffrey, Stepnisky. (214) *Sociological Theory*. Ninth Edition. McGraw-Hill Education Penn Plaza.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkin. (1971). *The Waste of Private House Keeping*. In *The New Feminism in Twentieth-Century America*. D.C. Heath and Company.
- Gilman, Charlotte Perkin. (1979). *The Yellow Wall-Paper*. In Baym, Nina (Ed) *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Fifth Edition, Vol. 2. Norton and Company Inc.
- Mackinnon, A. Catherine. (1989). *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Harvard University Press.
- Mohanty, P. Satya. (1979). *Literary Theory and the Claim of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*. Cornell University Press.
- Petrie, Charles. (1960). *The Victorians*. Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- Saadawi, El Nawal. (n.d). *The Heroine in Arab Literature*." In *African Literature an Anthology of Criticism*. Eds. Olaniyan Tejumola and Quayson Ato. Blackwell Publishing, 2010: 520-525.
- Said, Edward W. (1983). *The world, the text, and the critic*. Harvard University Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What is Literature?*. Bernard Frechtman (Trans.), David Caute (Intro.). Routledge, 1978.
- Udumukwu, Onyemaechi. (2017). *Literary Theory and Criticism an Introduction*. Charles-Martins Higher Education and Consulting Company.
- Uko, I., Iniobong. (2017, February, 23 ) *The Feminine Ontology and the African Reality: Changing Dynamics in an Evolving Society*. 52 inaugural lecture university of Uyo, Uyo. University of Uyo Press Ltd.
- Wellek, Rene, & Warren, Austin. (1956). *Literary Theory*. A Harvest Book Harcourt Brace & World Inc.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. (1967). *A Vindication of the Right of Women*. Norton & Company Inc.
- Benjamin, Walter.(1986). *Understanding Brecht*. Translated by Anna Bostock Introduction by Stanley Mitchell. Verso.