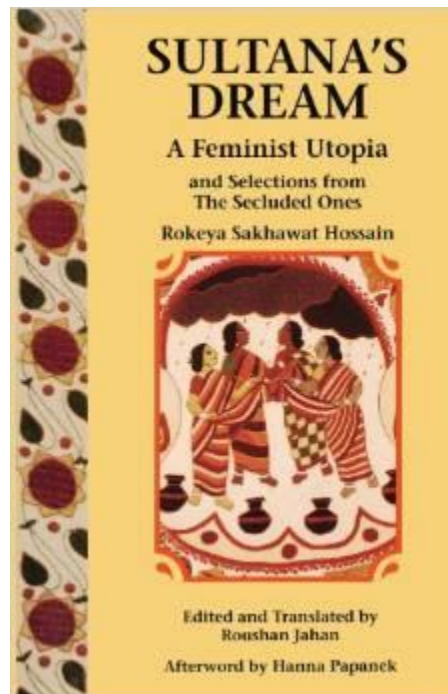


A Temporal Freedom of Women in *Sultana's Dream* and *The Yellow Wall Paper*: Through the Lens of a Critical Reading

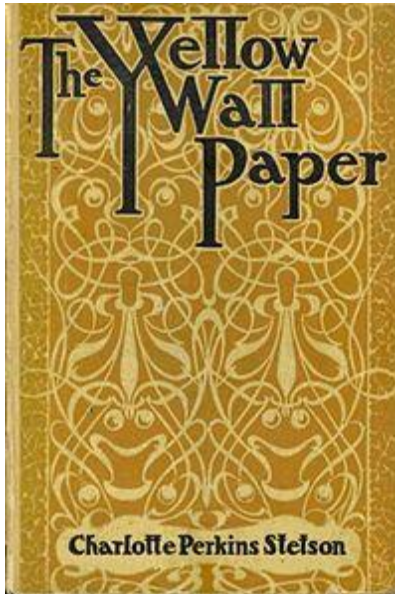
Tazin Ahmed, M.A. in English



Abstract

Sultana's Dream and *Yellow Wall Paper* are written by two different writers based on two different contexts – one in pre-independence India and another in pre-World War I, and yet there is an interesting thread that connects these two writings. This essay closely examines the two unique pieces of writing by two women writers - Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain, to illustrate how the protagonists of the two writings are culturally, socially, economically different, yet how they are same.

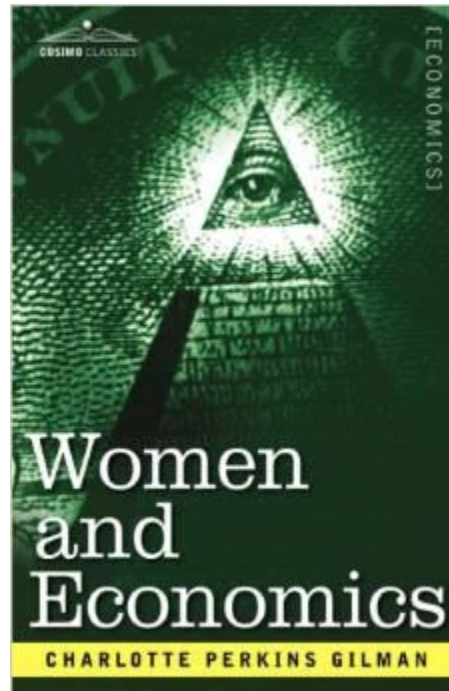
Key Words: Freedom, Imprisonment, Women, Oppression, Sultana's Dream, Yellow Wall Paper



Confined in Rooms

In both *Sultana's Dream* and *The Yellow Wall Paper*, women are confined in rooms or in 'jail' as created by John in *The Yellow Wall Paper* and by Sultana's husband in *Sultana's Dream*. In both the writings, the protagonists want to enjoy the flavor of freedom, either by 'dead papers' that is by writing journal, or by having a utopian dream of breaking away from the four walls of the *zenana*.

At the outset of Charlotte Perkins (Stetson) Gilman's story, the female narrator informs her reader's that she is 'sick'. John, her husband is a doctor, 'a physician of high standing'. He is very practical, has no belief in superstition and does not like anything 'that cannot be seen and felt and put down in figures'.



Sexuo-Economic Relationship

In *Women and Economics*, Gilman(1966) talks about the ‘sexuo-economic relationship’, between men and women, where men would work to earn enough so that women remain as furniture in the house and do things which please the men and remain ignorant about the knowledge of the outside world. In her work - *Women, Science and Fiction*, Shaw Debra Banita (2000) expresses that men purposefully keep the knowledge of the world hidden from women so that she is not dissatisfied with her state of being.

Restricted by Convention

Similarly, the narrator in *The Yellow Wall Paper* is forbidden to socialize with people. She is forced to abstain from over-stimulating intellectual discussion to supposedly give her body ‘rest’. Most importantly, she is also asked to keep away from any kind of work – her writing of the journal, where she could freely keep her opinion. The narrator feels she could be cured if she had a ‘congenial ‘environment which had ‘excitement’, but her husband prohibited her from such kind of activities until she is ‘well again’. She reports these in the journal which she writes secretly: ‘So I take phosphates or phosphites - whichever it is, and tonics, and

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:12 December 2014**

Tazin Ahmed, M.A. in English

A Temporal Freedom of Women in *Sultana’s Dream* and *The Yellow Wall Paper*: Through the Lens of a Critical Reading

journeys, and air, and exercise, and I am absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until I am well again’.
(10)



Courtesy: <http://www.sewallbelmont.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Rokeya-Sakhawat-Hussain-Envelope-1024x606.jpg>

Feeling Sick All the Time

Unlike, Sultana, the narrator in *The Yellow Wall Paper* is privileged with the ‘ancestral hall’ for the summer, when she is sick. However, the narrator’s husband does not believe she is sick about which she feels utterly helpless. The house has been untenanted for several years. The house is beautiful with a ‘lovely view’. There is a ‘delicious garden’ in the house, but the greenhouse is destroyed. The narrator feels something very strange about the house and believes it may be haunted. The room that she stays is ‘airy’ and well decorated, but she detests the yellow wall paper that the room is wrapped with. She hates the wall paper as she finds it ‘ugly’ and assumes the children must have hated it too, whose nursery the room was before she and her husband rented the house.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:12 December 2014**

Tazin Ahmed, M.A. in English

A Temporal Freedom of Women in *Sultana’s Dream* and *The Yellow Wall Paper*: Through the Lens of a Critical Reading

Developing Another Self

The narrator feels she is 'sick'; however, the narrator's husband does not believe she is sick and she feels utterly helpless. John, her husband is 'away all day', and she is alone the whole day. Sometimes he is away, even some nights when 'his cases are serious'. The narrator ironically says 'I am glad my case is not serious'. The narrator in *The Yellow Wall Paper* is not abused by her husband physically, yet his act of not taking her case seriously makes her even more frantic and depressed. She develops another self who learns to pretend in front of her husband. Her pretention is to lie when she chokes her emotions, her worries, her desires and most importantly her journal writing.

Woman in a Veiled Wall Paper – Trying to Get out

Slowly, as time passes by, the narrator gets more and more involved in the previously termed 'ugly' wall paper. She starts to notice patterns in the paper and when the moon light floods the floor of her bedroom and John is fast asleep, she feels as though the figure that she noticed in the paper shook the paper from within 'just as if she wanted to get out'. It is noteworthy to notice here that the narrator finds the pattern as 'she', meaning she can relate to a woman inside the veiled wall paper and find her as a mirror reflection. The narrator too wants to break away from the four walls that she is confined within and her final ripping off of the paper, unveils the true meaning of the story – a metaphor for women's discourse, her situation within the patriarchal society and her ultimate freedom from such confinement.

A Metaphoric Veil versus Real Veil

The narrator of *The Yellow Wall Paper* is not kept under direct veil, but yet she is inside a metaphoric veil where she is kept aloof from the connection to the outer world. The narrator of *Sultana's Dream*, on the contrary, is kept under direct veil.

Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain says men are ruling over women under many pretexts (In Ray, 64). The context of male ruling over the female in the society that the narrator refers to, use 'veil' as a master rule to dominate the women.

Morals of Men

They dawdle away their time in smoking. Some smoke two or three cheroots during their office time. They talk much about their work, but do little. (*Sultana's Dream* 21) No trade was possible with countries where the women were kept in the zenanas and so unable to come and trade with us. Men, we found, were rather of lower morals and so we do not covet other people's land, we do not like dealing with them. We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems that Nature has kept in store for us. (*Sultana's Dream* 17)

Seeking Different Ways for Freedom

In both the texts, the narrators describe different ways for them to seek freedom. In *The Yellow Wall Paper*, the narrator finds freedom through ripping off the yellow wall paper and in *Sultana's Dream*, the narrator finds her share of freedom via dreaming an Utopian Dream – where women would find their freedom through education and scientific advancement. The narrator in *Sultana's Dream* feels women are violence free, so if they are empowered with tasks like ruling the country and producing solar power, they can do it skillfully. So according to her, for a country to become prosperous and peaceful, there is no need for men's strength.

What is interesting is that two women from different sides of the world, one from east another from west, with different cultures and different religion, seem to face the same reality - lack of freedom. To an observer from outside, English society seems less oppressive than the M societies where the narrator like Sultana survives, but ironically the scenario that prevails in both societies is similar.

Rokeya's Record of Patriarchy

Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain composed *Sultana's Dream* to record her attitude towards the Muslim Patriarchy and was influenced by her beliefs that Indian Men and Women were, as Ray Bharti (2002) notes in her *Early Feminists of Colonial India*: “willingly collaborates in their oppressions”, (61) and that men's selfishness that makes women as mental slavers are the causes of degradation of women in India.

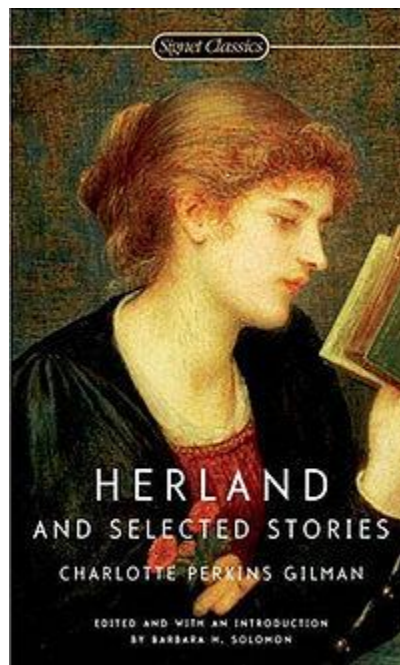
Rigid Seclusion: Nothing But Imprisonment

For Rokeya, rigid seclusion is nothing but imprisonment. Gilman, being an American also feels the same and portrays her view of imprisonment through the narrator. In one text, the narrator is oppressed in the name of religion and in another the narrator is oppressed in the name of sickness. In *Sultana's Dream* the narrator is forbidden to do any kinds of work other than the household chores, whereas in *The Yellow Wall Paper*, the narrator is forced to abstain from writing the journal, where she expresses her true feelings and she is also forbidden to go outside of the four walls of the palatial building.

Alternative Power Source

For the narrator, Nature and her abundant resources offer an alternative power source and thus open a doorway to a new world where woman and nature stand as the unmistakable agents of power. As the story proceeds (dream), Sultana's Dream of a world takes shape, where women move about freely, study at universities, live under nature's care for a harmonious world, while keeping men at home for domestic work.

Gilman's *Herland*



Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:12 December 2014**

Tazin Ahmed, M.A. in English

A Temporal Freedom of Women in *Sultana's Dream* and *The Yellow Wall Paper*: Through the Lens of a Critical Reading

Gilman, the author of *The Yellow Wall Paper*, also wrote a novel titled 'Herland' (1915) where, like *Sultana's Dream*, women seem better off than men. In the novel, Gilman dismisses the idea that women are only born for reproduction and performing all soft activities.

Sultana's Dream

In *Sultana's Dream*, the narrator belongs to a society where men believe they are the ones who would contribute to the scientific advancement, as they have better knowledge of the outer world. Fayeza Hasanat (2013) says, "if excellence in science and scientific research and the control of Nature were emblematic of men's power, then women in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* undoubtedly usurped that masculine space as they defied the masculine notion of power by gaining control over both man and nature" (115).

The Yellow Wall Paper

Similarly, in *The Yellow Wall Paper*, the narrator's believe that 'something queer' about the house is dismissed by her husband. She is discouraged to feel that way by her sensible physician husband who gives credence to what is observable, scientific or demonstrable through facts and figures. In other words he feels he has better knowledge of the outer world and science and since his wife has less exposure, she has lesser knowledge in science; so whatever she believes, if it cannot be brought under scientific definition then her belief should be dismissed. John, the narrator's husband, rather has found a scientific explanation to all her problems and that is 'a temporary nervous depression'. The narrator's brother, who also happens to be a physician, agrees with John's opinion so she is brought to this secluded mansion for 'rest'.

Paula (1984) comments: "because the narrator in *The Yellow Wall Paper* does not feel free to speak truthfully 'to a living soul', she confides her thoughts to a journal – 'dead paper'." (61) However, the narrator does not feel totally safe in writing the journal since everything is vivid in the opening passages of her journal which are fragmented. We find her writing about very mundane, safe topics like the house, her room, the wall paper and so on. However, with time, her language in the journal becomes more intense. The narrator stops depending on her

husband for emotional support and starts to depend on her writing of the journal. Nevertheless, she also learns to be pretentious in front of her husband and behaves in a controlled manner. She makes an attempt to change the room and move downstairs as she is 'horrified' with the sight of the wall paper. But to her dismay her husband does not allow her to do so as it 'requires other changes'. She makes another final attempt to get his consent to change the room but fails, resulting in her getting absolutely absorbed in the wall paper. In fact, she gets more involved with the living paper - writing, only to get more inclined to the dead paper - The Yellow Wall Paper. She starts to identify few women behind the wall paper and wants to join the women to free them from the wall paper. The women who are trapped beneath the wall paper are women which whom she can easily identify.

Once she began to identify with the women, she didn't have a way back, but to free them from the captivity of the paper. So the women shake the paper and 'she shakes it too'. 'I've got out at last.....' cries the narrator 'and I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!' (36)

Complex Ending

The ending of *The Yellow Wall Paper* is complex. The narrator turns insane at the end and it is both triumphant and grotesque. It is both positive and negative. Her loosing of sanity leans toward an alternative reality, challenging the patriarchy. She defies her husband's judgment that 'she suffers from temporary nervous depression', and directs herself towards her own logic, own perception and growing insane is only a means of stepping ahead in achieving – the ultimate sanity.

Her husband on the other hand 'faints' seeing her crawling over the wall. In other words, he has surrendered to her freedom by loosing sense, but it is important to note here that John, the narrator's husband faints only for a short while. It is a temporary surrender, while the freedom that the narrator enjoys by stepping over the body of her husband and moving towards the wall is also temporary. By stepping over the fainted body of her husband, she is defying the patriarchal voice of dominance, but it is only short lived. Her husband would soon come back to

consciousness and overpower her with a greater force. The patriarchal surrender is temporary and so is the of the narrator's achievement of freedom which will also be compromised.

The Yellow Paper Wall and Sultana's Dream

In *The Yellow Wall Paper*, the narrator wants to be heard by her husband, wants his time and wants to socialize with people, which are the solution to her sickness according to her logic. She doesn't want to create an utopian world without her husband. She wanted to stay with her husband and wanted to share everything with her husband. But when her husband constantly infantilizes her to her 'sickness', and her feelings about the house 'being queer' and her desire to 'shift the room' and her wish 'to get a congenial environment', she started avoiding him and getting involved in the wall paper.

This is completely opposite to the narrator of *Sultana's Dream*. She created a Utopian society, completely keeping away the male gender.

Utopian Women's Society

The idea of establishing a women's community or the Utopian desire to develop and enrich women's lives was first noted in the writings of Margaret Cavendish (2003) and her publication of *The Political Writing*, that started to take a prominent shape through the writings of Delarivier Manley, Sarah Scott and Mary Hamilton, among others, and reached its peak, with the publication of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1915) *Herland*. In Gilman's *Herland*, the concept of Utopian state reached its peak.

In *Herland*, three men, with three different male attitudes, reach a rich land ruled by "tall, strong, healthy, and beautiful women", (12) and then these three men experience three different types of experiences which are produced in the text. Sexual interaction, idea of marriage, fear of rape, problem of parthenogenesis and possibilities of natural child bearing – all these issues are addressed in the text in which, as Bartkowski (1989) notices, "Gilman replaces religion with sacred motherhood and eliminates sexuality". (32) Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* is not a narrative

of Him in pursuit of Her and there is no happy ending; instead, there is only the awakening from a “happy dream.” Rokeya’s Ladyland does not totally eliminate religion. It replaces specific religious faith with one uniform religion.

Similarities

As mentioned before, both stories, under study, though written by two writers of different contexts, have similarities. Apparently they may look different but with a critical reading, it is clearly visible that the underlying meaning that these stories are trying to convey is similar. In *The Yellow Wall Paper* for instance, the narrator rips off the wall paper to achieve ultimate freedom for the women trapped inside the paper, and to free herself most importantly. Her husband faints seeing her do so. However the total scenario is only temporary. And it will take a reverse gear soon, it is clear. So is the case of the narrator of *Sultana’s Dream*.

Ironically enough, even in the dream the narrator experiences, the ladyland where Sara is guiding her to, has its own limitations. The female of the Ladyland cannot move freely outside the Ladyland but are only free inside the Ladyland. Moreover, the sudden ending of the dream and the awakening of the dreamer function as a warning signal, to remind the readers that women’s empowerment was nothing but a temporary dream for woman in colonial Bengal, that the whole utopian structure of a perfect society was also stigmatized essentialist patriarchal ideology, that such dream would continuously recur and vanish until the awakened female consciousness reinvented the method becoming free.

After all, as Lorde Audrey (1984) declares: “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow [her] temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable [her] to bring about genuine change”. (112) So, it can be safely summed up saying that both narrators of *The Yellow Wall Paper* and *Sultana’s Dream* are culturally and socially different, yet suffer in the same manner and enjoy a sense of freedom – which is but momentary, and temporary.

References

Bacon, Francis.(1996). *The New Organon*. Ed. Lisa Jardins. London; Cambridge UP.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:12 December 2014**

Tazin Ahmed, M.A. in English

A Temporal Freedom of Women in *Sultana’s Dream* and *The Yellow Wall Paper*: Through the Lens of a Critical Reading

Bartkowski, Frances. (1989) *Feminist Utopias*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press

Cavendish, Margaret. (2013). *Political Writing*. Ed. Susan James. London: Cambridge UP.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman.(1973). *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. (1979) *Herland*. London: Women's Press.

Gilman. Charlotte Perkins. (1966). *Women and Economics*. NY: Harper and Rowe.

Hasanat Fayeza.(2013). *Sultana's Utopian Awakening: An Ecocritical Reading of Rokeya*. USA: Asiatic, Volume 7.

Lorde, Audrey. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. New York: The Crossing Press.

Paula A. Treichler. (1984). *Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper"*. Tulsa Studies in Women Literature, Vol 3.No 1/2.USA: University of Tulsa

Ray, Bharati. (2002). *Early Feminists of Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP.

Rokeya, Sakhawat Hossain. (1988) *Sultana's Dream and Selections from the Secluded Ones*. Ed. and tr. Roushan Jahan. New York: The Feminist Press.

Shaw, Debra Benita. *Women, Science, and Fiction: The Frankenstein Inheritance*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

=====

Tazin Ahmed, M.A. in English
 Lecturer
 Department of English
 Southeast University
 House#64 B, Road# 18, Block# B, Banani Model Town
 Dhaka-1213
 Bangladesh
tazin09_ahmed@yahoo.com