

Psychological Conflict and the Construction of Female Identity: A Comparative Study
of Selected Works of Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Mrs. Madhumitha S.

P G Student

Sri Ram Nallamani Yadava College of Arts and Science,
Kodikurichi, Tenkasi.

Mrs. R. Anitha @ Vanitha

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Sri Ram Nallamani Yadava College of Arts and Science,
Kodikurichi, Tenkasi.

ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on a comparative analysis of the psychological conflict and the construction of female identity in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This paper explores the internal lives of Maya, Saru, and the unnamed narrator, and examines how patriarchal and domestic societal structure leads to psychological disintegration and identity crises. While Gilman's work highlights the nineteenth century's neglectful medications of female distress through the 'rest cure,' Desai and Deshpande's characters experience the cultural complexities of the typical Indian problems within marriage. These

characters struggle with an identity crisis, with their childhood trauma playing a role in it. The paper uses psychoanalytic and feminist framework to argue that the 'madness' or trauma experienced by these protagonists is not only a clinical failure, but a desperate triggered response to the disruption of their autonomy, and the lack of support they need. Through a comparative lens, the study identifies universal patterns of female resistance against gendered socio-cultural expectations. This paper is also an analysis of cross-cultural feminism, bridging the gap between the nineteenth century western feminist theory through Perkins and the twentieth century Indian feminist works. The paper concludes that the construction of a female identity in these texts is frequently a transgressive act, necessitating a break from the claustrophobic roles of daughter, wife, and mother.

Keywords: Cross-culture, Identity, Feminism, Trauma, Societal structure.

Introduction

Feminist literary works give us an in-depth understanding of female psychological conflicts across different cultural and historical contexts. Works written by women often explore the struggles of women and bring to light the sufferings in rigid domestic and social structures.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, literature became a crucial space to articulate the feelings of emotional fragmentation and identity loss, and it also became a space to vent out suppressed emotions in a narrative form. Psychological disturbance in such text is rarely a clinical condition, but rather emerges as a response to their confinement. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Anita

Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* present women who experience marital struggle, emotional isolation within marriage.

Though they belong to different cultures and time, these works review striking similarities in their portrayal of marriage, repression and losing their identity. Each protagonist, Gilman's unnamed narrator, Desai's Maya and Deshpande's Saru, suffer from problems created by emotional neglect, rigid gender expectation and the denial of autonomy.

This paper examines how individual instability is not just a psychological conflict, but a result of chronic burden caused by patriarchal confinement. By using a comparative approach based on feminism and psychoanalytic perspectives, this paper states that “madness” in these texts is a result of resistance. Therefore, the construction of her own identity by avoiding all the assigned roles such as a wife, daughter and mother by the society is seen as an act of rebellion.

Feminist perspective

The main role of feminist literary criticism is to explain and question the social and ideological structures that shape women's experiences and representations. Home is traditionally viewed as a site of comfort, but often it becomes a space of confinement and suppression for women. Marriages are made to create fulfillment, but it often becomes the way to silence and control women.

The protagonists of all these three texts have experienced emotional neglect and repression of their intellect. The feeling of psychological unrest is due to social systems that deny individuality to people which makes them lose their identity. We can understand from this, how being themselves is made difficult for them because of these rigid cultural expectations. Thus, identity formation becomes difficult.

Psychoanalytic Perspective

From a psychoanalytic lens, the fractured consciousness of these protagonists is due to the trauma and repression they go through. Their narratives show suppressed fear, unresolved childhood experiences and anxieties surrounding sexuality and autonomy. The collapse of their true self and individuality don't occur suddenly but is slowly formed layer by layer because of emotional neglect and isolation.

Madness, therefore, may be explained as the breakdown of the force which makes them obey without satisfaction and by losing themselves. When basic expression of feelings is denied and when language fails, the psyche searches for desperate ways to express. Hallucination, silence and violence become symbolic expressions of their suppressed identity.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Gilman's short story shows a narrator suffering from depression. This short story is a critique of 19th century medical treatment called "rest cure", which was a treatment practiced to suppress female nervous disorders. The narrator is given "rest cure", restricted from not doing anything which gives her relief. The narrator is forced to stay inside a nursery-like room which has a yellow wallpaper on the wall. She becomes obsessed with that wallpaper.

"I am glad, my case is not serious! But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing. John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him" (Gilman 649). From these lines we can understand how easily her emotions are ignored. Her husband John, with his patriarchal mind set, dismisses her concern and treats her like a baby whenever she tries to explain how she's feeling.

The wallpaper becomes a symbol of her entrapment. The narrator starts to hallucinate that there is a woman inside the wallpaper trapped inside those patterns. The “rest cure” makes her isolation even worse. This obsession with the wallpaper and the will to let that woman out from the wallpaper makes the narrator’s mental situation worse, and eventually she becomes mad. The narrator resonates with the woman in the wallpaper and her madness itself is an awakening to her controlled life. Her madness peaks when she tears the whole wallpaper down to let that woman out and it is seen as a rebellion rather than a breakdown.

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's psychological problem starts because of an emotionally distant marriage. The childhood prophecy predicting death after her marriage becomes her only unresolved trauma as she has a highly vibrant happy life because of her father's love.

Their names say a lot about them. Maya is a highly sensitive, happy girl while Gautama is a busy lawyer, practical and rational, detached from life and sensitivities. Her high sensitivity is a total opposite to Gautama’s character. He doesn't give importance to her emotions, and this makes her feel isolated. Through Desai’s narrative technique we can clearly see Maya’s spiraling consciousness.

Her anxiety about that prediction becomes a paranoia which ends in a tragic act of violence. Yet this act is not only a symptom of instability but a result of neglecting her emotions and Gautama's failure to be an equal partner in marriage. Maya's psychological collapse is what happens when a woman's emotional needs and recognition are denied within marriage.

Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

Sarita, also called Saru, is the protagonist of Deshpande's novel. Her situation is different but equally and domestically oppressive. Saru achieves professional success as a doctor. But that triggers Manohar, Saru's husband to develop insecurity. He becomes jealous and feels emasculated by her success and that turns into sexual aggression. For her, the marital home becomes a place of humiliation and fear. Her childhood trauma of denial of her mother's love and favouritism further increase her brokenness. She is silent till the end, facing violence rather than being resistant.

Deshpande's narrative shows a silent burden. Saru starts to reflect on her life after she makes a visit to her parental home. Saru's awakening and decision is different from Gilman's narrator or Maya. Saru's journey shows the possibility of taking back the control of one's own life. She confronts her problems and memory, which allows her to become self-independent and self-aware once again.

Comparative Discussion

Though situated in different cultural contexts, these texts reveal shared structural patterns. All three protagonists experience confinement within marriage. Emotional neglect acts as the main cause of psychological destabilization.

The backgrounds of these texts are culturally and traditionally different. Though, they carry the same themes such as women oppression, emotional neglect and patriarchal dominance. All three protagonists experience the same confinement in their marriage life. Home, that must give them comfort gives them the burden of their life.

However, their ways of reacting to it is different. Gilman's narrator becomes mad, destroying the wallpaper as an act of freedom. Maya makes yet another destructive action which is even more tragic. Even for once, if Gautama had listened to her words and understood her emotions, there is a high chance that this would not have happened. Saru moves toward self-awareness, and that is only because Saru has a successful profession. She has her job she can fully focus on and not worry about problems such as Gilman's character and about Maya.

Western and Indian contexts give the narrative its outcomes, but the underlying cause remains the same, which is patriarchal hierarchy. When communication fails, madness, silence and violence become the alternative ways. Forming their identity becomes difficult and disintegrated. To claim their autonomy, they have to throw off the roles given to them through oppression.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Gilman, Desai, and Deshpande's stories explains well that psychological conflict in women's writing can never be reduced to personal instability. Instead, it is because of the pressure of the system that controls them, oppresses them and restricts their autonomy. The protagonist's breakdowns are a result of confinement, emotional negligence and rigid gender expectations.

Through feminist and psychoanalytic lenses, madness is a result of the problems they suffered. It makes them to hallucinate, be violent or become introspective, and that is a cry for help to bring back their original self after all that repression. Therefore, from disruption of their old broken self, the new identity formation begins. To become them, to become their self in these texts, they must challenge the given roles of daughter, wife and mother.

These narratives are historically and culturally different, happening in different timelines. But they collectively affirm that psychological fragmentation is a signal for the demand for autonomy. Society has made female identity favourable to patriarchy, but when repressed beyond limit, it becomes both fragile and defiant, which shatters all confinement.

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