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Feminist Psychological Perspectives on Female Oppression in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Short Story

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Abstract

Although The Yellow Wallpaper has been extensively examined through feminist and psychological perspectives, relatively few studies have explicitly integrated feminist literary criticism with feminist psychology to explain how patriarchal oppression is transformed into internalized psychological oppression within the narrator's consciousness. Addressing this gap, this study investigates the relationship between patriarchal authority, domestic confinement, and the narrator's psychological transformation in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper. Employing qualitative textual analysis informed by feminist literary criticism and feminist psychology, the study analyzes narrative descriptions, characterization, symbolism, and representations of power embedded in the text. The findings demonstrate that patriarchal oppression operates through three interconnected mechanisms: the medicalization of female experience, domestic isolation imposed under the guise of care, and the internalization of patriarchal authority that gradually fragments the narrator's identity. Rather than functioning solely as a symbol of confinement, the yellow wallpaper represents the narrator's transition from psychological subjugation to symbolic resistance against patriarchal control. These findings reveal that the narrator's psychological collapse constitutes a form of resistance generated by the contradictions of patriarchal domination rather than merely an individual mental disorder. The study contributes theoretically by strengthening the integration of feminist literary criticism and feminist psychology in literary analysis, while empirically offering a more nuanced interpretation of the interplay between patriarchal discourse, psychological oppression, and symbolic resistance in The Yellow Wallpaper.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in feminist literary scholarship have increasingly emphasized the intersection between gender, psychological well-being, and institutional power, reflecting broader academic concerns with women's mental health and the enduring impact of patriarchal structures on female subjectivity (Ningsih et al., 2026). Rather than viewing literary texts solely as aesthetic artifacts, contemporary feminist criticism examines literature as a critical site where systems of gendered oppression are produced, challenged, and psychologically negotiated (Lin, 2022). This perspective has gained renewed significance as scholars continue to investigate how literary representations of women's experiences expose the subtle mechanisms through which patriarchal ideology shapes identity, autonomy, and emotional resilience (Danial et al., 2026).

Literary narratives therefore provide valuable insights into the complex relationship between social authority, psychological experience, and women's resistance against oppressive cultural norms (Mirsch et al., 2025). Within this context, feminist literary criticism seeks to analyze how female characters are represented, how gendered power relations are constructed, and how women's voices are constrained or empowered through narrative discourse.

Among various literary genres, the short story holds a unique position due to its concise form and focused thematic exploration (Aurora & Margawati, 2024). Compared to longer forms like novels, short stories tend to present intense psychological experiences and strong symbolic meanings within a limited space . Scholars have pointed out that short stories are especially effective in capturing moments of emotional tension, identity struggle, and social criticism. Because of their compact structure, they often rely on symbolism, narrative voice, and psychological insight to convey deeper meanings (Nagaraj & Kejriwal, 2022). As a result, short stories have become an important medium for criticising gender norms, domestic roles, and institutional power in patriarchal societies.

One of the most well-known short stories in feminist literary studies is *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, published in (1981) (Karniasih et al., 2023). Written in the context of late nineteenth-century American realism and early feminist thought, the story reflects a time when women were often confined to domestic spaces and placed under patriarchal control. The narrative follows an unnamed female narrator who undergoes a “rest cure” prescribed by her husband, John, a physician who believes that intellectual activity will worsen her condition (Purba et al., 2024). As she becomes increasingly isolated in a room with disturbing yellow wallpaper, her mental state gradually declines. At the same time, her perception of the wallpaper changes, developing into an obsession with a woman trapped behind its patterns. The story is widely interpreted as a critique of patriarchal medical practices, domestic confinement, and the suppression of women’s intellectual and creative expression.

From a historical literary perspective, The Yellow Wallpaper also reflects broader debates about women’s roles in the late nineteenth century, particularly in relation to medical discourse and gender ideology (Lumanlan, 2025). At that time, many women diagnosed with “nervous disorders” were subjected to restrictive treatments like the “rest cure,” which limited activities such as writing, thinking, and social interaction. Feminist scholars argue that these treatments often functioned as tools of patriarchal control, reinforcing the idea that women were emotionally weak and intellectually inferior. Gilman Charlotte Perkins challenges this perspective by showing the psychological impact of such treatment (Kataria, 2025). Through the narrator’s fragmented voice and her interaction with the wallpaper, the story illustrates how institutional authority and gender expectations influence women’s mental and emotional experiences.

Several recent studies have examined The Yellow Wallpaper from different critical perspectives. Abdullah (2025) analyzes feminist resistance and patriarchal politics by highlighting how medical authority and domestic confinement function as mechanisms of oppression. The study emphasizes symbolic resistance through acts such as secret writing and the destruction of the wallpaper (Tang, 2023). While this research provides a comprehensive socio-historical and feminist reading, it primarily focuses on external structures of oppression rather than the internal psychological processes experienced by the narrator.

Similarly, Lumanlan (2025) employs feminist stylistics and Halliday’s transitivity framework to examine how language constructs power relations between the narrator and her husband. The findings reveal that the narrator is linguistically positioned as passive, while male

authority is represented as dominant and controlling. In addition, T. Fatima et al. (2025) explore language, style, and ideology using feminist stylistics, demonstrating how linguistic choices reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes. Although these studies offer valuable insights into representation and discourse, they mainly emphasize textual and linguistic analysis rather than the psychological dimension of oppression.

Despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to how patriarchal control is internalized within the narrator's consciousness and how it shapes her identity and psychological transformation. Most previous studies interpret the narrator's condition either as symbolic resistance or narrative representation, without deeply examining the psychological mechanisms underlying her mental deterioration (Rufaida & Nugraha Fajar Muhammad, 2021). Therefore, this study addresses this gap by applying a feminist psychological perspective integrated with feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic feminism, and discourse theory to explore how oppression operates not only externally but also internally within the narrator's subjectivity.

Although these studies offer important insights into patriarchal power, symbolism, and language use, most of them focus mainly on external forms of oppression or stylistic analysis (Lin, 2022). Less attention has been given to the psychological aspect of female oppression, especially how patriarchal control becomes internalised and affects the narrator's sense of self. While her mental decline is often interpreted as either madness or resistance, fewer studies examine the deeper psychological processes that shape her self-perception, agency, and emotional state. As a result, the connection between patriarchal authority and the narrator's psychological transformation (Lumanlan, 2025) still needs further exploration.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyse female oppression in *The Yellow Wallpaper* from a feminist psychological perspective. It focuses on how patriarchal authority, domestic confinement, and medical discourse influence the narrator's mental condition and contribute to internalized oppression. By combining feminist literary criticism with feminist psychological theory, this study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how gendered power structures operate not only in society but also within the inner experiences of female characters. Through qualitative textual analysis, this research ultimately aims to show how the narrator's struggle with identity, autonomy, and mental stability reflects the broader conflict between patriarchal control and women's search for selfhood.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using textual analysis to examine female oppression in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The primary source of analysis is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Writings* (1981), published by Bantam Books. This edition was selected because it presents an authoritative and widely cited modern publication of Gilman's work while preserving the original narrative first published in *The New England Magazine* in 1892. Using a standardized and accessible edition ensures textual consistency and facilitates comparison with previous literary scholarship. The analysis focuses exclusively on the text of *The Yellow Wallpaper* contained in this edition. A qualitative textual approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meanings, representations, and psychological experiences embedded in the narrative rather than to quantify textual data. As argued by Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative research is designed to explore and interpret how meanings are constructed within particular social and cultural contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This research is theoretically grounded in feminist literary criticism as proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), which serves as the primary analytical framework to examine how patriarchal ideology shapes the representation of female oppression in the text. This primary framework is further reinforced by feminist psychological theory (Ussher Jane M., 2011), which is used to analyse how oppression affects the narrator's mental condition and emotional experience. In addition, psychoanalytic feminism (Kristeva et al., 1981) is applied to interpret the construction of female subjectivity and identity fragmentation, while Foucault (1976) concept of power and discourse is employed to examine how medical authority functions as a mechanism of patriarchal control. Finally, this study incorporates Abdullah (2025) to strengthen the interpretation of symbolism as a form of feminist resistance.

Data Collection

Data were collected through close reading and textual documentation. The text was examined repeatedly to identify passages related to patriarchal authority, domestic confinement, psychological distress, internalised oppression, and resistance. Relevant excerpts, dialogues, and narrative descriptions were categorised based on these themes to ensure systematic analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an interpretive thematic approach through iterative close reading of the selected textual excerpts. The analysis began by identifying representations of gendered power relations using feminist literary criticism (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979), followed by feminist psychological analysis to examine the narrator's psychological responses to patriarchal oppression (Ussher, 2011). Psychoanalytic feminism was subsequently employed to interpret identity fragmentation and unconscious representation, while Foucault's concept of power and discourse guided the analysis of medical authority and institutional control (Foucault, 1978). Finally, symbolic interpretation was applied to examine *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a representation of both oppression and resistance (Kristeva et al., 1981).

Trustworthiness of the Data

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, the study adopted the qualitative criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was established through repeated close reading of the primary text and the use of direct textual evidence to support every interpretation. Dependability was maintained by applying a systematic and transparent analytical procedure from data selection to thematic interpretation. Confirmability was achieved by grounding all analytical claims in textual evidence and relevant theoretical frameworks rather than personal assumptions. Furthermore, an audit trail documenting the stages of coding, categorization, and interpretation was maintained to enhance methodological transparency and allow the analytical process to be followed and evaluated by other researchers.

DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that patriarchal authority functions as the dominant structure shaping the narrator's experience. From the perspective of feminist literary criticism proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), this authority reflects the ideological positioning of women as passive subjects within male-dominated discourse. John's dual role as husband and physician reinforces this hierarchy, allowing him to exercise both personal and institutional control over the narrator.

1. Patriarchal Authority in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

The analysis of The Yellow Wallpaper shows that patriarchal authority becomes the dominant form of control that shapes the narrator's experience. This authority is mainly represented through the character of John, who acts both as a husband and a physician (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Hartmann et al., 2025). His dual role strengthens his power and limits the narrator's ability to express her own thoughts. One of the key textual evidences is:

You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?" (Gilman, 1892, p. 647)

This statement shows how the narrator's voice is dismissed and replaced by male authority. The phrase what can one do reflects her lack of agency and acceptance of John's control. The data indicate that patriarchal authority operates not only through direct restriction but also through psychological influence, where the narrator gradually becomes dependent and passive.

2. Domestic Confinement and Psychological Impact

Another important finding is the presence of domestic confinement as a form of oppression. The narrator is physically restricted within a specific space and is not allowed to engage in activities such as writing (Gul, 2025; Ussher Jane M., 2011). This condition limits her self-expression and contributes to her psychological distress. This is shown in the following quotation:

"*There comes John, and I must put this away, he hates to have me write a word*" (Gilman, 1892, p. 649)

The act of hiding her writing suggests that even her private thoughts are controlled. The data also show that the room itself, with its barred windows and isolated setting, reinforces the sense of restriction. This confinement leads to emotional instability, increased anxiety, and a growing sense of isolation.

3. Internalized Oppression

The findings also reveal that oppression is not only external but becomes internalized by the narrator. Over time, she begins to regulate her own behavior based on John's expectations. This is reflected in her statement:

"*I take pains to control myself before him... and that makes me very tired*" (Gilman, 1892, p. 648)

This indicates that the narrator is no longer only controlled by external forces but also by her own internalized beliefs (Foucault, 1978; Gul, 2025). The data show that she starts to doubt her own perceptions and suppress her emotions, which leads to psychological exhaustion and identity confusion.

4. Symbolic Representation of *the Yellow Wallpaper*

The yellow wallpaper functions as a central symbol in the story. It represents both confinement and resistance. The narrator's growing obsession with the wallpaper reflects her internal struggle. This is evident in the following quotation:

"*I've got out at last… in spite of you and Jane!*" (Gilman, 1892, p. 656)

The image of a woman trapped behind the wallpaper parallels the narrator's own condition (R. Fatima, 2025; Kristeva et al., 1981). The data suggest that the wallpaper becomes a projection of her suppressed identity and desire for freedom. However, this resistance appears alongside her psychological breakdown

This dynamic is further explained through Michel Foucault's (1978) concept of power and discourse, where medical authority functions as a legitimized system that defines what is considered "normal" or "pathological." The narrator's statement, "You see he does not believe I am sick! And

what can one do?" (Gilman, 1892, p. 647), demonstrates how her subjective experience is invalidated and replaced by male-defined knowledge.

From a feminist psychological perspective (Ussher, 2011), this condition leads to the erosion of self-trust and the development of psychological dependency. The narrator gradually internalizes John's authority, resulting in self-doubt and emotional suppression. This process reflects the transformation of external control into internal psychological domination, where the narrator begins to regulate her own thoughts according to patriarchal expectations.

Below is the Summary of Oppression Patterns in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Table 1. Forms of Female Oppression in *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Forms of Oppression	**Description**	**Forms of Oppression**
Patriarchal Authority	Male dominance controls narrator's decisions and voice	Patriarchal Authority
Domestic Confinement	Physical and social restriction limits freedom	Domestic Confinement
Internalized Oppression	Narrator adopts and reproduces oppressive beliefs	Internalized Oppression
Symbolic Resistance	Wallpaper represents both restriction and rebellion	Symbolic Resistance

The table presented above summarizes the major forms of female oppression identified in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1981) based on the findings of this study. This categorization is not merely descriptive but reflects an integrated analytical framework combining feminist literary criticism, feminist psychology, psychoanalytic feminism, and discourse theory (Foucault, 1978; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Kristeva et al., 1981; Ussher Jane M., 2011). Each category represents a distinct yet interconnected dimension of oppression that operates simultaneously within the narrative. Patriarchal authority functions as the primary structural force that legitimizes male dominance, particularly through the figure of John, whose authority is reinforced by both marital and medical roles. Domestic confinement represents the spatial and social restriction imposed upon the narrator, limiting her autonomy and reinforcing her dependence (Muhammad & Purwarno, 2026). Internalized oppression illustrates the psychological dimension of control, where the narrator adopts and reproduces the beliefs imposed upon her, leading to identity fragmentation and emotional exhaustion.

Finally, symbolic resistance highlights the complex role of the yellow wallpaper as both a representation of confinement and a site of psychological rebellion. These categories demonstrate that oppression in the story is not a singular or isolated phenomenon but a multidimensional process that operates across social, spatial, discursive, and psychological levels. By organizing the findings into these categories, the study provides a clearer understanding of how different forms of oppression interact and reinforce one another, ultimately shaping the narrator's mental condition and her struggle for autonomy.

Discussion

The result showed the concrete discussion. Below is the discussion:

Patriarchal Control and Psychological Domination

The findings show that patriarchal authority in The Yellow Wallpaper does not only function as social control but also as psychological domination. John's role as both husband and physician reflects how power is legitimized through both personal and institutional authority (Farissar Sabila Ardhia Nur, 2019). This condition creates an imbalance where the narrator's experience is considered invalid, while male perspectives are treated as rational and authoritative. As a result, the narrator gradually loses confidence in her own thoughts and becomes dependent on external authority.

Confinement as a Mechanism of Oppression

Domestic confinement in the story can be understood as a mechanism that reinforces patriarchal control. The restriction of movement and intellectual activity limits the narrator's ability to express herself and cope with her condition (Ersa et al., 2025). From a psychological perspective, isolation and lack of stimulation can intensify emotional distress and lead to cognitive instability. The setting of the room, therefore, is not only a physical space but also a representation of control over the narrator's body and mind.

Internalization of Oppression

The internalized oppression experienced by the narrator shows how external control can shape internal psychological processes. Instead of openly resisting, she begins to discipline herself and conform to expectations (Eagly et al., 2012). This reflects a deeper level of oppression, where individuals accept and reproduce the structures that limit them. The narrator's exhaustion and self-doubt indicate that her identity is being shaped by these internalized beliefs.

Symbolism and Psychological Resistance

The yellow wallpaper plays a crucial role as a symbolic space where oppression and resistance intersect. The figure of the trapped woman represents the narrator's suppressed identity, while her attempt to "free" the figure reflects a desire for autonomy (Aman et al., 2023). However, this act of resistance is expressed through psychological breakdown, suggesting that prolonged oppression can distort the way resistance is manifested. This highlights the complexity of oppression, where liberation and instability occur simultaneously.

The findings of this study demonstrate that female oppression in The Yellow Wallpaper operates through a complex interaction between social structures and psychological processes. From the perspective of feminist literary criticism (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979), the narrator's experience reflects the broader ideological construction of women as passive and dependent within patriarchal society. However, this study extends beyond representation by incorporating feminist psychological theory (Ussher Jane M., 2011), which explains how such external oppression becomes internalized and shapes the narrator's mental condition.

Furthermore, the concept of power and discourse proposed by Michel Foucault (1976) provides a critical framework to understand how medical authority functions as a mechanism of control. John's role as a physician allows him to define reality for the narrator, positioning her as irrational while legitimizing his own authority. This discursive power contributes to the narrator's psychological dependency and loss of self-agency.

In addition, psychoanalytic feminism (Kristeva et al., 1981) offers insight into the narrator's fragmented subjectivity. The image of the woman trapped behind the wallpaper represents the narrator's unconscious self, reflecting a split between her socially constructed identity and her

suppressed desires. This fragmentation illustrates the psychological consequences of prolonged oppression, where identity becomes unstable and divided.

Finally, the symbolic interpretation of the wallpaper, supported by Abdullah (2025), reveals that resistance in the story is both present and paradoxical. While the narrator's act of tearing the wallpaper can be seen as a form of rebellion, it also coincides with her psychological breakdown. This suggests that resistance under oppressive conditions may not always appear as rational or structured action but can emerge through fragmented and destabilized forms of expression.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that female oppression in *The Yellow Wallpaper* operates through intertwined social, institutional, and psychological mechanisms. Patriarchal authority, domestic confinement, and medical discourse function not only as external systems of control but also as forces that are gradually internalized by the narrator, resulting in identity fragmentation and psychological distress. The analysis further reveals that the yellow wallpaper serves as a complex symbol of both patriarchal confinement and the narrator's symbolic resistance, illustrating how psychological breakdown simultaneously reflects the destructive effects of oppression and the struggle to reclaim female subjectivity.

By integrating feminist literary criticism with feminist psychology, this study contributes to literary scholarship by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between patriarchal discourse, psychological oppression, and symbolic resistance in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The findings reinforce the significance of examining literary texts not only as representations of social inequality but also as explorations of women's psychological experiences under patriarchal power.

Nevertheless, this study is limited to a qualitative textual analysis of a single literary work and focuses primarily on feminist literary and psychological perspectives. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to other literary contexts or broader historical representations of women's oppression. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing *The Yellow Wallpaper* with other feminist literary works, incorporating interdisciplinary approaches such as trauma studies, cognitive literary studies, or medical humanities, or examining readers' responses to representations of female psychological oppression across different cultural and historical contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest

Use of Artificial Intelligence

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist with language editing, grammar checking, readability improvement, and refinement of the manuscript's English expression. Gemini AI was used as a supplementary tool for language review, wording refinement, and assistance in improving the clarity and coherence of selected manuscript sections. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the authors. The authors independently determined the research design, theoretical framework, data selection, analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and final content of the manuscript. No AI tool was used as an author or as a substitute for the authors' scholarly judgment. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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