

The Body's Political Dilemma from the Feminist Critical Perspective

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Abstract. This paper, grounded in Feminist criticism, examines Jane Eyre and The Yellow Wallpaper to dissect how patriarchy controls and oppresses women's bodies through spatial isolation, medical discourse, and the discipline of daily routines. It reveals how patriarchal order strips women of bodily autonomy through the stigmatisation of “madness”, spatial confinement, and labour exploitation. Yet, Jane Eyre and the unnamed narrator in The Yellow Wallpaper wield madness as a weapon and writing as a medium, fiercely reclaiming bodily sovereignty within the confines of their oppressive circumstances. These works collectively demonstrate that the female body is not merely a vessel for oppression, but rather the very source of resistance and the material foundation for the formation of subjectivity.

Keywords: Feminist criticism, Jane Eyre, The Yellow Wallpaper, Patriarchy

1. Introduction

Feminist criticism emerged in the 1960s as a dynamic and politically charged critical theory developed from the burgeoning women's liberation movements across Europe and America [1]. Its core mission lies in deconstructing the entrenched structures of gender oppression within literature and culture, exposing how patriarchal ideologies are produced, reproduced, and naturalised. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' inspired feminist criticism to dissect the constructed nature of 'social gender'. Within this framework, 'the politics of the body' constitutes a pivotal critical dimension. Feminist scholars contend that patriarchy's control over women operates directly through the body, transforming it into a site of disciplinary power.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* depict the existential predicament of nineteenth-century women by portraying the bodily struggles of women within patriarchal frameworks. This paper, grounded in feminist critical theory, focuses on these two works to deeply analyse how patriarchal society systematically disciplines women's bodies through mechanisms such as spatial configuration, medical discourse, and division of labour. It also reveals how female characters in the texts employ 'madness,' writing, and even direct physiological resistance as weapons to challenge the oppressive patriarchal order, thereby shaping their subjectivity.

2. The website of discipline: patriarchy's systematic control over women's bodies

Patriarchal society has meticulously woven a dense and pervasive web of discipline, confining women's bodies within the rigid boundaries of prescribed roles and spatial domains. In *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this disciplinary apparatus is primarily enforced through spatial isolation, pathologising interpretations imposed by medical discourse, and compulsory labour division.

2.1. Spatial confinement and bodily isolation

Space is a product of social relations [2], and a crucial vehicle for the exercise of power. In *Jane Eyre*, the attic at the top of Rochester's estate serves as the physical confines imprisoning Bertha Mason. This dark, secluded space symbolises the patriarchal society's rejection and expulsion of women who fail to conform to its idealised image of the wife – docile and chaste. Bertha, deemed dangerous and mad due to her primal passions and mental instability, was forcibly isolated from the heart of domestic life, reduced to the 'madwoman in the attic.' This spatial confinement not only stripped her of freedom of movement but also symbolically reduced her body to a threatening presence requiring control and concealment.

Similarly, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator is forcibly confined by her husband John to a nursery room on the top floor, adorned with 'ugly' yellow wallpaper, for 'convalescence.' This room had previously been used to confine 'unruly children,' its windows barred and the bed bolted to the floor. This so-called 'convalescent cure' was in fact spatial confinement, stripping her of her right to choose her environment, her social rights, and her right to labour, binding her body firmly within a symbolic cage. This 'rest cure' was a genuinely prevalent practice in late 19th-century America, and Gilman explicitly protested against this so-called 'rest cure' which was in essence 'physical confinement' [3]. Its core logic was to suppress women's "neurotic" tendencies through absolute physical stillness and mental emptiness, thereby restoring them to conform to the passive, dependent norms of 'femininity'.

2.2. Medical discourse and the construction of 'madness'

In *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault dissects how modern medicine and psychiatry define "madness" as a deviation requiring control and correction. Patriarchy deftly allied itself with medical authority, pathologising women's resistance, suffering, passion, or unconventional demands as 'madness.' In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester and the patriarchal society he represents attribute Bertha's "madness" to a hereditary 'blood disease' and innate 'moral depravity,' using this as a pretext to justify her lifelong confinement. Tragically, Bertha's body, eroded by medicalised discourse, is progressively negated in its entirety. Ultimately, she loses the capacity to articulate her own defence, her physicality reduced to evidence of her 'inhumanity.'

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator is trapped by physical discomfort, intense aversion to her surroundings, and a fervent yearning for writing and social connection. These genuine, deeply rooted desires are dismissed by her husband John as 'temporary nervous exhaustion,' 'delusions,' and 'lack of willpower,' revealing utter contempt and disdain. Medical discourse, wielding its authority, monopolises the interpretation of her bodily sensations. It not only invalidates her subjective experience but also brutally reduces her legitimate acts of resistance—such as insisting on self-expression through writing and questioning unreasonable treatments—to mere symptoms of worsening illness. Through such characterisation, medical discourse cloaks patriarchal control over the narrator in a veneer of 'legitimacy', rendering the act of control ostensibly justified. Her bodily

experiences remain unheard, regarded solely as requiring further authoritative management and correction.

2.3. Physical labour and the cultivation of motherhood

Moreover, patriarchy prescribed women's division of labour through a series of mechanisms, particularly disciplining their bodies within the domestic sphere and maternal roles. During the Victorian era, women were regarded as inferior and subordinate. Prior to 1842, British society instilled in women the notion that their paramount duty was to willingly become appendages to men [4]. Within this social milieu, women were ruthlessly confined to the narrowly defined role of the 'angel of the household' [5]. They were required to be virtuous wives and self-sacrificing mothers, as if their bodily and life value existed solely to serve the household and perpetuate the family line.

In *Jane Eyre*, the harsh discipline, gruelling labour, and meagre conditions Jane endured at Lowood School constituted a disciplining of her body, aimed at moulding her into an obedient, enduring, and useful working-class woman.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's intense creative impulse is deemed harmful 'intellectual labour' by her physician husband and brother. Conversely, the only 'labour' she is encouraged—indeed, compelled—to perform is the passive role of a patient in absolute repose, alongside the latent yet denied role of motherhood. This deprivation of creative labour and enforced isolation from motherhood constitutes a dual castration of her bodily potential and subjectivity. Her body is commanded to 'idle,' yet is in fact imprisoned within the non-productive, non-subject position of 'patient' imposed by patriarchy.

3. Dance of resistance: the body as strategy and medium for challenging patriarchal order

The human self is an impulse to dominate, to control, and to achieve self-perfection within a given environment; this very need constitutes humanity's fundamental requirement [6]. Though ensnared within the web of discipline, the narrators of *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* did not succumb to becoming complete victims. At the very limits of their oppression, their bodies erupt with astonishing resistance. This resistance manifests as a tenacious struggle for bodily autonomy, a creative utilisation of confined spaces, and the arduous construction of subjectivity through the act of writing—a bodily act that shatters silence.

3.1. Struggle for bodily autonomy

Jane Eyre's defiance is evident in her assertion of bodily autonomy. At Gateshead, the young Jane dared to fight back against Master Reed's violent beatings, defending her fundamental right to bodily integrity with a stance both childlike and resolute. At Thornfield, faced with Mr Rochester's seduction and wealth-based advances, she steadfastly upheld her bodily and moral autonomy, refusing to become his mistress and choosing instead to preserve her physical and spiritual integrity: At Moor House, she rejected St John's loveless marriage under the guise of a sacred mission, once more upholding the principle that the union of body and emotion must not be severed, refusing to allow her body and soul to become estranged within a cold marriage.

The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* resists in a more covert manner. Defying her husband's prohibition, she writes in secret. This act of writing represents her struggle to reclaim control over the expression of her own thoughts and feelings. As her 'illness' deepens, her resistance increasingly focuses on the room itself, particularly the suffocating yellow wallpaper. Her interpretations of the

wallpaper patterns—seeing trapped, crawling women—are projections of her repressed self-awareness manifesting in hallucinations. Ultimately, by tearing at the wallpaper, she symbolically destroys the physical and psychological cage imprisoning her. This act of challenging spatial confinement through the body—the writing hand, the tearing motion—constitutes the most intense declaration of bodily politics under desperate circumstances.

3.2. Madness as a weapon and the inversion of space

Patriarchy employs “madness” as a tool to stigmatise women, yet I contend that “madness” constitutes a distorted form of female resistance, bringing about a subversive reversal of spatial dynamics.

Bertha Mason is unquestionably the “madwoman in the attic”. Her very existence poses a formidable threat to Rochester's hypocritical marriage and the superficial harmony of Thornfield Hall. Her arson is devastating, yet it represents the complete destruction of the very edifice symbolising patriarchal property and order. Her “mad” power ultimately reduces Thornfield, her prison, to ruins, forcing Rochester to lose his estate, his sight, and an arm – thereby fracturing the established power structure to some degree.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator ultimately identifies with the woman crawling beneath the wallpaper, crawling across the floor herself, even 'over' her husband lying prone. She declares: 'I have freed myself at last, and I think you can never put me back in again!' At this moment, the room that confined her is spiritually 'occupied' and 'reversed' by her, transforming from a place of discipline into a space where she gains a twisted form of 'freedom' and 'subjectivity.' Her “mad” behaviour becomes the most thorough subversion of the disciplinary logic of 'rest cure.'

3.3. Writing: an act of inscribing bodily experience and constructing subjectivity

Writing, as a physical and creative labour, played a central role in the resistance of these two women. It served not only as an outlet for catharsis, but also as a vital act of inscribing their experiences and constructing their subjectivity.

'A history of women is, in truth, a history of their suppression and enslavement. Patriarchal society enforces the social and historical oppression of women through subordinate state apparatuses—the family and marriage—and through direct and indirect means of coercion, such as ethical orders and conceptual systems.' [7] This suppression permeates every sphere of patriarchal civilisation while remaining concealed, effectively erasing women from history and relegating them to the “unconscious” of male-dominated narratives. Feminism seeks to render this “unconscious” visible, affirming women's inherent worth and rights.

Through her own narrative, Jane Eyre recounts her journey from orphan to governess, lover, and ultimately independent woman. She places bodily experience and neglected, devalued emotions at the heart of her story, shattering society's silence on the plight of women from lower classes. Through her writing, she crafts a complete female character: one imbued with strong moral conviction, pursuing freedom, equality, and spiritual independence, and ultimately achieving economic and emotional autonomy. In this process, writing becomes the pivotal medium through which she establishes and asserts her subjectivity.

The Yellow Wallpaper employs the diary form to unfold its narrative. The narrator's very act of writing constitutes direct defiance of her husband's prohibition. Within the pages, she meticulously chronicles physical exhaustion and pain, her emotions evolving from bewilderment and rage into hallucinations, then into a struggle for self-identity. Concurrently, she observes and interprets her

surroundings, particularly *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This writing serves as her lifeline—an attempt to comprehend her predicament and grasp at her fading sense of self. Though the diary's tone grows increasingly fragmented and chaotic, it authentically portrays a woman's complete breakdown under extreme psychological oppression. It stands as a blood-stained indictment of the harm “rest cures” inflicted upon women's physical and mental wellbeing. Adopting the guise of public writing, the work directly confronts the ruthless devastation wrought upon women's bodies by the prevailing misguided medical practices of the era. Here, writing becomes a political weapon for exposing truth and seeking societal change.

4. Material foundations of subjectivity: the body and the reconstruction of the feminine self

The empiricism of feminist criticism stems from the lived experiences of female critics themselves, alongside their acute sense of womanhood and subjectivity [8]. It emphasises that subjectivity is not an abstract spiritual entity, but rather one deeply rooted in embodied experience. The body, as the physical conduit through which we engage with the world, serves as the material foundation for perceiving life's joys and sorrows, experiencing human relationships, and processing the spectrum of human emotions. Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* employ profound literary strokes to reveal the body's crucial role in women's process of breaking free from traditional shackles and reconstructing their subjectivity.

4.1. Affirmation of bodily experience: the starting point of subjectivity

Jane Eyre's awakening of self-awareness began with a profound perception of physical suffering. Confined within Gateshead's “Red Room”, extreme terror induced fainting spells, where she first sensed her own fragility and the crushing weight of external oppression. At Lowood, hunger and cold truly taught her the ‘laws of survival,’ revealing that spiritual dignity requires the fulfilment of bodily needs as its foundation. Her love for Rochester, accompanied by physical attraction and emotional stirrings, was never denied or belittled by her as mere bodily passion. When she left Thornfield and struggled for survival in the wilderness, her body nearing collapse forced her to confront the brutality of existence. At her limits, she sought help through her physical state, gaining an opportunity for a new beginning. Jane's ultimate attainment of independence and happiness was always accompanied by the presence of her body—transforming from a bearer of suffering to a creator through labour, and finally to a vessel for love and familial affection.

4.2. Boundaries of madness: the body as witness to the limits of subjectivity

The Yellow Wallpaper depicts how, under extreme discipline, the body becomes a brutal stage for the collapse and distorted reconstruction of subjectivity. The narrator's “madness” is not wholly passive, but rather a response by body and mind to unbearable oppression. Her obsession with and hallucinatory interpretations of *The Yellow Wallpaper* are visual distortions expressing a repressed self-awareness. The image of a woman crawling behind the wallpaper is a projection of her own bodily experience of confinement and the deprivation of autonomy. The violent act of tearing at the wallpaper is both destruction and a desperate struggle for ‘liberation’ born of despair. Through a rather tragicomic means—madness—the narrator achieves a complete escape from the shackles imposed by patriarchal society [9]. At the story's conclusion, ‘I crawl round and round this long room, my shoulders grazing the graffiti on the wallpaper, so I cannot lose my way.’ This physical friction with the wallpaper symbolises a morbid fusion and identification with the very space that

once confined her. Her “subjectivity” is ultimately 'established' through complete immersion in hallucination and bodily crawling. This undoubtedly represents the tragic subjectivity of a psyche destroyed by patriarchal medical discipline. Her body, in madness, becomes the sole site and witness where her subjectivity is utterly distorted and 'realised' through annihilation.

5. Conclusion

Through feminist critical readings of *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, it becomes abundantly clear that the female body is by no means a silent object or tamed vessel within patriarchal narratives. Within the 19th-century socio-cultural context, it was subjected to systematic and rigorous discipline and control by the patriarchal order through spatial confinement and the pathologising constructs of medical discourse. The body became the central arena for the inscription, performance, and contestation of power.

These two classic works profoundly illustrate how women, ensnared within the meticulously woven disciplinary web of patriarchy, transformed their bodies into potent weapons of resistance. *Jane Eyre*, with extraordinary resilience, steadfastly safeguarded the moral integrity and freedom of action embodied within her flesh. She refused to become Rochester's mistress and resolutely rejected the loveless marriage offered by the clergyman, defending her dignity with lucidity and unwavering resolve. Consider Bertha Mason, who unleashes a devastating conflagration to utterly consume Thornfield Hall, the very symbol of patriarchal order. Those raging flames are her silent cry against oppression and confinement, a fierce yearning for liberty and equality. Then there is the unnamed narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, who wields her pen as a sword against the icy decree of silence, venting her inner resentment and unwillingness through words; and who, in the frenzied act of tearing at the wallpaper, launches a fierce assault on the invisible shackles imprisoning her. These forms of resistance vividly demonstrate that the body serves as the material foundation and wellspring of strength through which women challenge oppression and strive for autonomy.

Simultaneously, female subjectivity is intrinsically linked to bodily experience. *Jane Eyre*'s formidable and complete sense of self stems precisely from her profound awareness of physical existence, her courageous struggle against survival demands, and her comprehensive pursuit of both love and independence. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's subjectivity collapses and then reconstructs in a distorted form, as her body and senses undergo extreme discipline and pathological amplification. Her 'madness' represents the desperate catharsis of repressed self-awareness through bodily sensations and actions. Though ultimately tragic, it demonstrates how the neglect, negation, and discipline of the female body lead to the alienation and destruction of her subjectivity.

Thus, from a feminist critical perspective, both *Jane Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* demonstrate that the body remains an eternal battleground in the journey towards women's liberation. It is both the primary target and site of patriarchal oppression, and the most authentic source of female resistance. Understanding and pursuing female subjectivity necessitates a return to embodied experience, listening to and respecting the body, and defending bodily autonomy. Feminist literary criticism, by focusing on the politics of the body, both exposes historical oppression and resonates with contemporary women's demands for bodily autonomy—such as reproductive rights, resistance to violence, and opposition to sexual harassment—and their quest for bodily liberation. Only when women truly control their bodies can their subjectivity fully blossom. These two classics, through their profound writing, provide literary testimony and spiritual impetus for the struggle for women's dignity and freedom.

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