
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender Roles in Transition: A Study of Women Issues and the Changing Role of Gender in the Feminist Literature from the Progressive Era

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| ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of women in the Progressive Era through different stories written during similar times, as well as to develop deeper insight into the social and emotional impact on the personal freedom of women. During the 1900s, women were considered inferior in a patriarchal society. They were subdued and discriminated against in all walks of life, and they were obliged to perform family duties and society. Before the Progressive Era, women were oppressed and treated as second-class citizens. They were considered only wives and mothers, created only to obey and serve their husbands, to look after their children and to take care of the household. As women's attitudes changed, reform movements gained momentum in the late 19th century. American women were no longer seen as mothers or wives confined to their homes; rather, societal change demanded that they be educated, work and contribute to the social order. As a result, the Women's rights movements in the 19th century and the Feminist Movements in the early 20th century were involved in a series of efforts to fight for the restoration of gender equality. Thus, female roles in American society in the Progressive Era changed drastically in terms of education, job opportunities and improved living conditions. The objective of this study is to examine and analyze the women characters, their issues, as well as the changing gender roles in the works of Charlotte Gilman, Kate Chopin and Susan Glaspell based on the structural elements, using qualitative research with documentation technique.

| KEYWORDS

Feminist Movements, Progressive Era, oppressed, gender equality, freedom, patriarchal society, education.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The objective of this research is to examine women's roles during the Progressive Era. The study includes the psychological and emotional aspects of women characters based on the stories written by female authors as feminist literature in the Progressive era.

The research includes stories such as *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin, *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell and *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Gilman.

These writers advocate the idea of gender equality. They convey the message of women's rights through their stories and reject gender inequality in the male-dominated society. These stories present the plight of married women, their exploitation and subjugation. Men treated them as inferiors and subordinates. Thus, through the years of suppression, they wanted freedom and liberty and no longer desired to remain oppressed. In *Trifles* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the female characters reject social norms and fight for their identity and individuality.

In Glaspell's stories, many of the female characters are determined to turn over societal rules and restrictions in their quest for independence and fulfilment (Atlas N.2019). Glaspell sees how all women's lives are connected by shared experiences and that by helping each other, everyone's lives improve.

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Glaspell writes of these shared experiences in *Trifles*: "I know how things can go - for women... We live close to each other and we also live far from each other. We all go through the same things — it's just the same things..." The two women characters in Glaspell's play know that women share a common understanding of family life: marriage and "kitchen things" and how isolated they can be from their own families, neighbors, and society.

Glaspell writes here explicitly about her own heartbreak in a way that gives meaning to all women and all people. Her writing takes the personal experience and makes it universal, thanks to her deep insight of "how things can be — for women" is quite literally confined in an attic, but it becomes emblematic of the female subversive desire to challenge all-pervasive patriarchal standards — a desire which can be expressed only through images of irrationality, passion, and imprisonment (Foster 95).

On the other hand, Charlotte Gilman alludes in her story, *The Yellow wallpaper*, how a woman is locked away in the domestic sphere, forced to comply with men as the head in the public sphere.

In the story, *The Yellow wallpaper*, Jane is a symbol of the patriarchal society's oppression of women, particularly those who do not conform to societal norms. Her confinement reflects the limited choices and opportunities available to women at the time, especially those who were considered "mad" or "hysterical." In this way, Jane represents the consequences of a society that suppresses women's individuality and self-expression. This suppression was reflected in the way that some texts of the *Yellow Wallpaper* were not presented in their original forms; many texts omitted the phrase "in a marriage" from a very important line at the beginning of the story: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage." The reason behind this omission is unclear and strange, as Gilman's views on marriage are illustrated in the story (Wikipedia).

The story presents the negative effects of societal oppression and the value of standing up for oneself, even if this means women's loss of sanity as illustrated in the story; the narrator's "madness liberates her from patriarchal concepts of appropriate feminine behavior." (Ghandeharion et al. 2016. P. 116).

2. Literature review

During the 19th century, women were considered simple homemakers. Many people believed that God had assigned women the responsibility of being wives and mothers. Women were repressed and had limited opportunities. The constant pressure of being a woman quickly caught up with them and caused health issues and poor health. These emotional frustrations led to some sort of covert rebellion. Sometimes, they were even obliged to provide financial support to their families. The few jobs that women were able to do were school teachers or governess.

The Progressive Era (1890-1920) was a pivotal period in women's reform and marked the beginning of the Women's Revolution. The Progressive Era refers to the period in the early 20th century, characterized by widespread public concern about the disadvantages of rapid industrialization. The Progressive Era marked an important turning point in American history because it marked the beginning of a resounding call for social welfare and the rights of ordinary Americans, including women's rights.

During this period, women began to reject social norms that limited them to the roles of motherhood and homemaking. They supported important social reforms, such as women's suffrage, an end to child labor, and workplace safety. Progressive women made important contributions to the entire progressive movement and set the stage for women's rights for decades to come.

The progressive movement was shaped by the contributions of women reformers. Women's activism during this era was often associated with the widespread mobilization of women for their right to vote.

However, progressive women also contributed to other important reforms related to public health, prohibition, juvenile delinquency, child labor, and immigrant rights. In addition, at that time, the government did not provide social programs such as home visits by social workers, food stamps, and other forms of social assistance. Progressive women worked together to provide these services to marginalized Americans.

Some of the leading women reformers during the progressive era were Jane Addams, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. These women championed the right to vote for women and their entitlements to property, economics, and labor. Additionally, during this time, many women did not receive the recognition they deserved for their work. The movement encountered considerable opposition because it addressed the moral issue of women's personal freedom.

During the Progressive Era, women also experienced industrial advancements and obtained more jobs. This was accomplished through social, political, and governmental reforms. At that time, women had the right to vote due to the 19th Amendment. The women's suffrage movement proved that women were strong enough to fight for their rights. Women were the driving force in politics as well. Thus, the Progressive Era brought many changes to women and their role in society.

Another important term related to gender roles is Feminism. It is closely related to women's movement for women rights during the nineteenth century to end the emancipation of women and to stop oppression based on gender. Feminist movements emphasized that women should have equal rights and opportunities in all kinds of fields, such as education, economics, and occupations. They also called for equal rights in political matters, such as equal representation and the right to vote. (Dewi et al., 2023).

One of the feminist writers is Charlotte Perkins Gilman; her story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) reflects women's views on marriage and careers in their respective domains. In the story, the narrator gives birth to a baby and suffers from post-partum depression. Her husband, John, a physician, diagnosed that she suffers from hysteria. In addition, a three-month "rest cure" in an isolated house's attic is advised for her. The narrator loves writing, an intellectual activity, but John forbids her from writing or even having any companionship. Her isolation and her preoccupation with the yellow wallpaper in her attic room gradually drive her into insanity, a slow psychological deterioration due to treatment of a 'rest cure' prescribed by her husband. (Cohut 2020). This treatment represents the oppression and imprisonment of women. In an article published in 1913, Gilman criticized the way that physicians such as S. Weir Mitchell, a specialist who treated her neurasthenia and had advised her to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," and to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again." She argued this had led her to come "so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over." She wrote that she *sent a copy of the story to Mitchell, who so nearly drove her mad, but "he never acknowledged it. – It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy"* (Gilman, 1913).

During the late nineteenth century, another American author and a feminist writer, Kate Chopin, tells stories of women's independence and freedom in a male dominated society. Her writings examine the struggles of women for independence and equality, which were unusual and unacceptable by men during the progressive era. Besides calling for women's independence, Chopin's writings also highlight the emotional liberation of women. (Scofield, 2006). This emotional liberation is expressed by Mrs. Mallard, the protagonist in Chopin's story *The Story of an Hour*: "Free! Body and soul free! She kept whispering." (Para. 13-14)

The Story of an Hour can be looked at as a feminist work because the main character, Mrs Mallard, is looking forward to living the rest of her life independently from the constraints of the patriarchal society. (Groves, 2019). The most important part, though, is that this realization comes after the protagonist's experience after the news of her husband's death in a train accident. This did not mean that she was not sad about her husband's death, as it is expressed in the story: "And yet she had loved him, -- sometimes"; it is only that her feeling of empowerment, independence, and freedom was stronger.

Besides Gilman and Chopin, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) can also be regarded as a feminist literature despite its early publication date. The play ridicules the hypocrisy, conceit, and selfishness of men in a patriarchal society. The play shows that women are not to be trifled with. Despite being written more than 90 years ago, Glaspell's play still has relevance for modern-day male and female relationships. Its primarily feminist viewpoint makes a strong argument for women to be true to their own significant—not trivial—experiences and to move beyond harmful biases and oppressive presumptions.

3. Methodology

The method used in this research is a descriptive objective approach and close reading that requires focusing on the intrinsic elements of the stories by analyzing and explaining them in detail. Data obtained for the research is from two sources: the primary source, that is, the text of the stories and the secondary source, which includes the internet and articles published in periodicals and journals.

4. Discussion

This study aims to show how women begin to question and even demolish patriarchal chauvinism and move away from their subservient position in patriarchal society.

Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper* deals with the plight of women at the turn of the century. The story encapsulates the use of unscientific treatment of mental illness in women and the repressed social, economic, and emotional life of women during the late 19th century. The story can also be interpreted as a revolt against male domination.

All three literary works, *The Story of an Hour*, *Trifles* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, reflect and highlight 'women's mental illness and women's oppression. In *Trifles*, Mrs Wright is bold and expressive, while the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Mrs. Mallard in *The Story of an Hour* are submissive. The protagonists of the three texts struggle for their liberty and freedom. Ultimately, those married women manage to secure a different ground for themselves. (Qasim et al. 2015).

Gilman came to be a strong advocate for women's rights to all women however, only after suffering years of aborted productivity and frustration of spirit. Her own life can be closely related to that of her narrator in her story "*The Yellow Wallpaper*." After her marriage and subsequent birth of her daughter, she experienced bouts of depression, or "hysteria," as it was described in her day and perhaps temporary insanity. No one understood how sick she was or that the matter understood mental illness, but "earnest

friends" encouraged her to use her willpower to fight off depression. Gilman later declared its practical purpose in her accusation of Dr. S. W. Mitchell's 'rest cure' for mental illness and emphasized the public message of feminism.

In her attempt to gain wholeness for herself and other women, Gilman began writing articles for *Woman's Journal and for People*, a more radical voice for women's suffrage. Her story "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" was the first of her works to examine the restrictive life of women.

With her work in literature, she criticized 19th-century society. She aspires to bring a change and to prove to people that the discrimination of gender roles and the constraining behavioral standards for women predominant in the patriarchic society of the 19th century could lead to catastrophic consequences.

The protagonist's breakdown is indicated by her changing perception of the pattern of the wallpaper in her room, and finally, the transformation of the image of the woman behind the wallpaper swallows her sense of identity. Although the story of confinement ends with a disastrous picture of madness, this tragic ending has a rebellious assertion against the male domination of women. Balancing the enclosed space of illusion and the sense of reality, Gilman reveals the narrator's inner world through her reaction to the wallpaper. The precarious task of representing one's madness is accomplished by the complex layers of narrative in this story. It attempts to examine the effects of suppression on women's mental health, which drive them to commit suicide to liberate themselves from male dominance society and the role of suppression in madness, which is also one way of liberation for women.

As Ali Shireen (2018) reiterates in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*", Gilman presents a woman's perspective on issues such as women's insanity that prevents the suffering of more women; she also reveals the emancipation of women from their confining conditions.

Gilman blends irony in this story by using images of imprisonment both outside and inside the house. Describing the outside, the narrator writes that it is a beautiful place but adds, "There are hedges and walls and gates that lock" (p.no 648). The bedroom, chosen, of course, by her husband, is a former nursery with barred windows, and the world outside these windows takes on a subtle connotation as she describes "those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers and bushes, and gnarly trees" where she imagines she sees people walking about, but she remembers that she is supposed to use her will to hold down such fancies.

Sometimes, she imagines a great many women shaking the paper. As they crawl around behind the front pattern, trying to get out, she says, "They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white (449). But while the pattern forms bars in the moonlight, by day, the women seem to get out because she can see them from all her windows, creeping in the lanes and gardens, hiding when someone approaches. As the trapped women, both inside and outside, merge into the narrator herself, her sympathy increases." She associates their creeping movements with the humiliation she suffered by herself and other women whose mental and physical movements have been restricted by society when she says, "*Most women do not creep by daylight...I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight. I always lock the door when I creep by daylight*" (452).

When the narrator's husband tries to get her to open the door and starts to chop it down with an axe, she calmly tells him that he does not have to use force but will find the key "under the plantain leaf" in the yard where she has tossed it. Perhaps this is Gilman's utmost irony--allowing her seemingly crazed narrator to imply that the key to opening doors is in the natural order of things, that it is unnatural to force her into a world of logic where sex distinctions have limited her humanity. When her husband finds the key, the truth, too late, he discovers her repeating the helpless, misdirected crawling of a bewildered child. When he faints upon seeing her, she merely crawls over him, which could suggest her triumph over her prisoner or oppressor.

Gilman's narrator, like her counterparts in real life, was a woman whose creativity, indeed her whole life, was controlled and sometimes stifled by the rigid gender roles in society. It is not difficult to compare the dilemma of the woman in the story to that of women in the nineteenth century. It is the regression that leaves women unfulfilled and leaves the narrator of this story trapped in an infantile world, locked in a nursery with barred windows, crawling on all-fours, both mentally and emotionally, to a helpless state.

Thus, at the end of the story and through a feminist lens, we can see how she was liberated through madness—how she did not need to live by her family and society's rules and expectations in those moments of freedom.

As (Alkan Halit 2021) states, Society converts 'an angel in the house' into 'the madwoman in the attic' under the name of 'rest cure'. To be imprisoned in a room may have enormous risks of disappointment, madness, and suicide. Gilman raises awareness about women who are always misunderstood, ignored, suppressed, and labelled as mad. The revelation leads the narrator to believe that she has seen her new self in the woman creeping behind the pattern of the yellow wallpaper. Hence, Gilman suggests that a woman can free herself if her financial conditions are radically changed by allowing her a dialectical movement between the private sphere

and the public sphere. Although the road to freedom and independence is complicated and chaotic, as the patterns of the wallpaper, women will eventually manage to liberate themselves, even if it is through insanity. It's ironic that her insanity leads to her freedom from defying societal norms.

In Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*, Mrs. Mallard as the main character, subtly feels unhappy in her marriage as a wife. After hearing the news of a train accident in which her husband was travelling, Mrs Mallard retires in her room to brood over the past and her strained relationship with her husband, as well as her future life without him. She seems relieved of her newly found freedom after the news of her husband's death in a train accident.

This feeling of freedom and a new life and new beginning is elaborated in Chopin's use of Spring outside, symbolizing the birth of a new life where Mrs Mallard could live happily without the restrictions of her marriage and her husband.

"She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below, a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window." (*The Story of an Hour*).

The following paragraph from the story also echoes Mrs Mallard's struggle to liberate herself from the societal rules and expectations associated with marriage and gender that muzzled her for many years.

"Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will--as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. When she abandoned herself, a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: free, free, free!" (*The Story of an Hour*).

The repetition of the word 'free' underlines the importance of getting out of her marriage. "She is now liberated from this institution, and she is capable of living her life in the best possible fashion."

(Ahmetpahić and Kahrić, 2020, p. 34).

Another example in the story illustrates Mrs. Mallard feelings of freedom and liberty- "There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature."

This quote reflects the importance of individual rights and freedom for women. "Mrs. Mallard realizes that after the death of her husband, she will no longer be bound to the will and control of others, which allows her to live according to her own wishes. According to feminism, women should be freed from dependence on men and have full control over their own lives. (Dewi et al., 2023).

Moreover, the one-act play by Susan Glaspell illuminates the idea of women liberation through her work *Trifles*. The title draws attention to women's issues, suggesting that all issues relating to women in this period, 1916, were considered trifles. The play represents an oppressed main character, Mrs Wright who was subjugated to control and isolation by her husband. She suffered abuse and discrimination in her long years of marriage. As a result, her identity was lost somewhere on the way. In her youth and before marriage, Minnie Foster was a cheerful girl who loved singing in choirs on Sundays. But after marrying Mr Wright, Minnie became Mrs Wright, and with this new marital status, Minnie gradually changed as she was expected to follow the role of a 'wife' as carved by the patriarchal society. The play highlights a strained relationship between man and woman that could lead to destructive consequences. It also shows how women "react when that legal system is about to destroy one of their own" (Angel, 1997, p. 780).

While working as a reporter, Glaspell covered a murder trial in Iowa in 1901 on which she based her play; in this crime, a wife who was stifled of every ounce of happiness from her being killed by her husband. The play was first performed in 1916; later, it was published in 1920 as a short story entitled *A Jury of Her Peers*. A team of a young district attorney, a sheriff and a neighbor of the victim arrive at the scene of a crime to investigate it. They are accompanied by the sheriff's wife, Mrs Peters and Mrs Hale, the neighbor's wife, who eventually solve the crime by paying attention to the small details in the house. From the beginning of the play, women's unity is illustrated by the two female characters standing next to each other, looking at the men searching Mrs Wright's Kitchen and later deciding to hide the motive behind Mrs Wrights' killing of her husband. Female solidarity is depicted as a deep and safe connection through the play, such as between Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters.

Glaspell explores the theme of the difference between genders in terms of attentiveness, the fact that women are more attentive to little things, which women perceive as crucial, whereas men perceive them as trifles. The male characters in the play try to find evidence for the murder by looking at big things and obvious things such as rope and searching the upstairs bedroom, and the

barn, but not the kitchen, which they think is not important. The female characters, on the other hand, pay attention to small details and little things in the kitchen; they discuss Minnie's motive for the killing of her husband. They also look at trifle things in the kitchen, which they recognize as part of a puzzle. When put together in proper order, they present a full picture. According to the play, Mrs. Peter discovers a broken bird cage in the cupboard and a dead bird in a sewing basket. Seeing how the bird was killed, Mrs. Hale realized that Minnie's husband killed Minnie's only friend — the bird. The two women recognized and reasoned the everyday facts of an abused woman, from "trifle" objects to conclude that Mrs Wright killed her abusive husband. "They then act as "a jury of her peers" to make an actual trial difficult, if not impossible, by destroying the evidence that would convict her of murder." (Angel, 1997, p. 781).

Throughout the play, Glaspell contrasts male and female views of things. She retains and engages the audience's sympathy strongly on the side of the women. The audience, as Susan C. W. Abbotson argues, "are asked to witness Mrs Wright's life rather than Mr Wright's death, and we are shown that the true "crime" has been the way she was being subjugated and "destroyed" by her marriage." (2003, p. 262. The crime of psychological domestic violence against women, which men such as Mr Wright inflict on their partners, is a problem that was obvious in society during that time and continues to the present day

Glaspell also makes use of the different instances of discovering men's false domination. As Mr. Hale exclaims, "Well, women are used to worrying over trifles." The men's attitude of superiority alienates and polarizes the women together as a protective unit. The play showcases some instances of difference in logical thinking as another point of manifestation of the gender opposition. The men are wondering why the murderer used a rope instead of a more effective gun. The women oppose that this murder was made as an act of revenge for strangling a favorite bird by Mrs Wright, which perplexes all when a gun is handy and is reminiscent of all this strangling of that bird. The man explained it by the simple fact that the cat might have eaten the bird, paying no attention to the absence of the cat in the house. Thus, the story demonstrates the futility of men's way of thinking and the absence of any attention to detail. It also suggests that women are more intuitive, sensitive and more careful to the needs of others. It is these differences that allow Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale to find the clues needed to solve the crime, while their husbands miss the same clues. Thus, we find that women played an essential part in the investigation by paying attention to the details. Glaspell shows how a home becomes a space that women can claim and through which they find unique ways of forming their own identities and express themselves; "and thus how domestic space turns out to be a basis for women to claim language of their own signs and symbols which only they can decode even though they are depicted as inadequate in the 'men's' world." (Akşehir, 2008, p.2). Throughout the play, the women communicate and construct a 'female language' which enables them to read and decode the traces that Minnie Foster leaves in her home; for example, the pattern of her quilt, which the women identify and recognize as a sign of her mental state.

The story showcases the repression of American women by a male-dominated society during the late 1800s and reminds the audience that women are not to be dismissed as less intelligent or less able and that unfairly silencing them will lead to revolution. The author uses gender conflicts to expose the prejudice of society and women solidarity in the play. Glaspell can be considered as one of the modernist reformers who tackled women's psychological, social, and economic problems; many critics, writers, and advocates of women cite her play *Trifles* as one of the greatest works of American theatre.

5. Conclusion

The result of this research, by analyzing the three stories, shows that the women characters in their marital status were repressed and discriminated against. They stood for their rights and fought for their identity and individuality. Through the dialogues of the characters and paying attention to their behavior and actions in the stories, we find that the women characters exhibit feminism, the right to equality and freedom. It is because of literary works such as those discussed in this paper that women have succeeded in making society hear their voices. Although they were silenced and confined in a domestic sphere, which can be considered as 'prison', they "used the female space of the domestic sphere to develop associations and enhance their own power" (Kilde, 1999, p. 452). The feminist authors emphasized that women should be able to assert themselves. In addition, women should be allowed to be physically, economically, and emotionally independent of their male counterparts.

Subsequently, women have come a long way. They are equal to men, and they can work and do as they like without being stopped, confined, or labelled. In modern times most women enjoy their individuality and freedom. By promoting and securing women's rights and gender equality, women have gained dignity, recognition, and autonomy in their lives. The realization of their own power and their continuous struggle for women's empowerment have brought and will continue to bring revolutionary changes in the status of women in society. Further research can be conducted on the feminist ideas presented in these stories and can be compared with contemporary feminism. It can be explored further through the concepts of identity, inequality, ethnicity and gender.

6. Suggestions

In writing this research, the writers have tried to analyze the mental state and actions of the women characters in the selected literary works from the progressive era. The writers recommend that those who are interested in a similar study to use the feminist approach to understanding and enhancing the portrayal of women in contemporary feminist work and to do a deeper study and analysis of the characters or characterization of these works from feminist values and perspective. Examining and using the feminist approach in analyzing feminist literary works would enhance the comprehension of these works. The writers of this paper hope that this research paper will be useful to both the readers and the researchers who are interested in feminist literary works and who are interested in analyzing feminist values in any type of fiction.

Finally, the writers also hope that this study will enrich readers' knowledge of literature, especially students of English Literature, as well as the literary scholars who could use this paper as an additional reference and as a starting point for their research.

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