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Trapped and Silenced: Claustrophobic Fear in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This paper is to explore women's fear in the two renowned texts, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), written respectively by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Margaret Atwood. In the two texts, two protagonists, Jane and Offred, share the same fear of being governed and imprisoned by patriarchal authority, a claustrophobic fear of being cut off and segregated, which is mainly reflected in two aspects: trapped in the "room", and silenced voice. Their respective struggles and resistances would be analyzed as well.

Key words: Claustrophobic fear; Space and room; Silenced voice

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The Yellow Wallpaper, written by the prominent American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), was published in 1892, when the first-wave feminism was in full swing in the U.S. Since then, it was widely anthologized and later became recognized as a classic and canonical masterpiece. The short story is based on Gilman's real life experience: her serious bout of post-partum depression after she gave birth to her daughter and the exhausting "rest cure" prescribed by the popular doctor Silas Weir Mitchell. Like Gilman, the narrator Jane suffered from a nervous breakdown and was forced to receive the rest cure treatment prescribed by her physician husband John. Complete rest and isolation thus became her entire life in the rented house where she was kept in nursery room at the top of the house. As there were nothing that engaged her attention (except for her secret writing), she was gradually drawn to *the yellow wallpaper*, in which she saw a woman trapped inside, and further descended to psychosis. Later in her 1913 article "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*", Gilman explained that her purpose of writing the story was "to save people from being driven crazy" (para.10) and to point out the danger of the prevailing rest cure and the advice that she should "'live as domestic a life as far as possible', 'have but two hours' intellectual life a day', and 'never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again'" (para.4). The short story actually transcends her purpose and stands as one of the early foremost feminist texts, urging people to reflect on women's roles in the domestic sphere.

Approximately 100 years later in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* was published. Though Margaret Atwood, the renowned Canadian writer, wrote the monstrous misogynous Republic of Gilead in the future, she insisted calling this book of hers a "speculative fiction", not science fiction, since it was what "we could actually do" (Jansen, 2011, p.188) and most of it were traces taken from the real world. In this dystopian novel, against the backdrop of failing environment and fertility, a male chauvinist, homophobic and racist military group founded the totalitarian Christian theocracy within the border of former United States. All the undesirable groups, especially women, were strictly governed and persecuted by the regime's "surveillance, suppression of information, 're-education' centers, and totalitarian violence" (Neuman, 2006, p.857). Those women who were fortunate enough to stay inside the Republic instead of being shipped to the borders to clean up nuclear waste were divided into distinct classes and pushed back into the house performing roles assigned to them. As several critics noted, this book reflected on former feminist movements and the mood in the 1980s in North America when a backlash posited women's liberation movement as the cause for many

problems at that time (which was delineated in Susan Faludi's 1991 award-winning book *Backlash*).

Despite the huge time gap between the two literary masterpieces and the differences in genre and plot, they share one thing in common – fear, a fear of being controlled and locked up by patriarchal authority. In the late Victorian age, Gilman wrote this gothic short story, in which a woman desperately dreamt to climb out of the nursery room; after nearly a century, after the victory of suffragists and the second-wave feminist movement, Atwood presented us a dystopian world where women were pushed back again into the house and slaved by the misogynistic totalitarian government. Though one shows the diary of a late Victorian woman suffering from depression and rest cure, the other a tape recording of a sex slave's victimization in an imagined nation, looking into the texts together would be fruitful since both deal with the same shared fear that is still haunting.

In this paper, I am going to examine the two protagonists (Jane and Offred)'s fear of being governed and imprisoned by patriarchal authority, a claustrophobic fear of being cut off and segregated, which is mainly reflected in two aspects: trapped in the "room", and silenced voice. Their respective struggles and resistances would be analyzed as well.

1. CONFINING ROOM AND SPACE

The haunting claustrophobic fear of both protagonists' is showed in the literal meaning of "room" and space. In both texts, the protagonists were pushed back into the house, each locked up and segregated, their life became "a painfully prolonged prison term" (Malak, 1987, p.13) in a limited space.

Room and domestic space is often charged with political meanings. As Wendy Gan (2009) remarked, it is "an instrument of power and ideology"; in a Foucaultian sense, it "produce[s] disciplined subjects, in particular, though not exclusively, women" (p.23). We can first examine the setting in YW, both the house and the room. The house is an ancestral hall, a "colonial mansion, a hereditary estate" (Gilman, 2002, p.141). It is "quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village […] there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people" (p.142). The mansion is depicted as the oldest European style castle in America back to colonial time, a heritage of European lineage, a patriarchal mansion. It is situated far away from villages, standing alone with all its guards. Inside there are lots of separated little houses scattering here and there, segregating people from one another. Among these rooms, John picked for Jane the most isolated and remote one at the top of the house. Though Jane guessed the room was used as children's playroom, it makes one feel dubious since "the windows are barred […] and there are rings and things in the walls" (p.143) on which some patches of wallpaper are stripped off. The floor is "scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through wars" (p.145). Besides, outside the door, there is another "gate at the head of the stairs" (p.144). Clearly, it is not simply a playroom for children. Every exit is either barred or locked; only a nailed-down bed is in the room with the rings in the wall covered with the hideous wallpaper. This is more like a prison, or mental asylum used to confine people. As Jane described that the room looks as if it had been through wars, the room once might have been used to lock up an array of Bertha Masons, or have segregated them from anyone else. Jane became a prisoner, alone in her cell, segregated and cut off.

Jane naturally resented this room at first. She hated the room and the wallpaper with "sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" in "a smouldering unclean yellow" (p.143), and described the room with hostility and horror, which can be read between the lines. After all, it was not her choosing. If she wanted to choose a room, it would be the "one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window" (p.142), but John wouldn't let her, even after she begged him for it. As her obsession with the wallpaper grew, she discovered there were a front pattern and a sub-pattern, in which a woman figure was trapped inside. In Davison's analysis, she pointed out that a relationship is forged "between consciousness and physical space", and "the narrator's fears and suspicions are inscribed in the 'torturing' and 'pointless' pattern" (2004, p.60). Thus, Jane actually projected her discontent and fear for her confinement to the wallpaper and gradually identified the woman trapped inside as her alter ego. No wonder she saw the wallpaper in such a gruesome way: it looked like there were "broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare[ing] at you upside down […] and those absurd, unblinking eyes [were] everywhere" (Gilman, 1996, p.145); and the front pattern "strangle[d] so […] [women] g[o]t through, and the pattern strangle[d] them off and turn[ed] them upside down, and ma[d]e their eyes white" (p.152). Clearly, the fear and horror that she couldn't tell anyone was fully expressed in her treatment of the paper in her diary. Like the woman trapped under the front pattern, she was confined to a limited space and felt suffocated.

If we say that Jane was locked up in a remote suburb, then Offred, the handmaid (or sex slave) was imprisoned right in the heart of Gilead. The Commander's house she lived in was "[l]ate Victorian […] built for a large rich family […] with a grandfather clock in the hallway" (Atwood, 1996, p.18). Like Jane's colonial mansion, the house was old. It was late Victorian, when the story of Jane's unfolded. Offred's room, compared with Jane's, was filled with more pieces of furniture. There were a

"chair, a table, a lamp [and a single] bed" (p.17), like a simple hotel room. What differentiates it from a hotel room is that the chandelier on the ceiling was removed, in case the woman in the room would hang herself. The window "only open[ed] partly", the rug on the floor was "folk art, archaic, made by women […] [a] return to traditional values" (p.17), and the door never "shut properly" (p.18). At first sight this room might be too normal to catch attention, but these details make one feel suffocated. The handmaids who lived in it were closely watched and controlled. The window could not be opened fully; the rug advocated the patriarchal idea – return to traditional roles in the house. One even could not choose death for herself. Under its ordinary cover, it was a smothering sinister room.

Inside the Commander's house, each group of women was assigned to different rooms or space. The Commander's wife Serena Joy was supposed to sit either in the sitting room or the garden, which was prepared for her as a privilege. Marthas like Rita were naturally given the kitchen. All were kept inside the house, fulfilling their respective roles: the wife was to behave well and to kill their time, Marthas the chores, and the handmaid waiting in her room for the sex ceremony and for pregnancy. All were pushed back into their rooms, the domestic space. Here I agree with Mohr (2005)'s remark that in Gilead powerful "men exert[ed] all social control, monopolize[d] power, and occup[ied] the public sphere, women [were] essentially powerless and relegated to the domestic sphere" (p.245). Women in Gilead could not go out without a good reason: the handmaid could go shopping with the tokens, but they must go with another handmaid, each spying on another; the wives had a secret schedule, without which the opportunity to call on another would be hard to come by. Otherwise, they would be locked up in the domestic space forever.

The claustrophobic fear was best revealed in the narrator Offred when she was forbidden from working and from owning money like other female employees as the Commanders of Gilead were taking control of the country and setting new laws. When she came back home, she felt "as if somebody cut off [her] feet" (Atwood, 1996, p.188), making her paralyzed and depriving her of the public space. She was desperate and numbed, feeling "shrunken, so that when [Luke] put his arms around [her], gathering [her] up, [she] was small as a doll" (p.191), powerless and panic-stricken.

The two works showed the striking resemblance of anxiety and fear. The rooms were not chosen by the women characters themselves. Though one is a late-Victorian wife and the other a sex slave in imagined Gilead, both were in a way pushed into the room, like prisoners. Offred refused to say it was her room and Rita's kitchen was "not Rita's any more than [Offred's] table [was] [hers]" (Atwood, 1996, p.20), since she clearly knew and faced their condition. She as a handmaid was forced to wait and rest in her room, doing nothing, a bit like Jane's suffering from her rest cure, "wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig", with "the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing" (Atwood, 1996, p.79). Besides, both were haunted by the ghosts of their predecessors in the monstrous room. Jane looked through the front pattern of the wallpaper and found women trapped inside trying to climb through, but "nobody could climb through that pattern – it strangles so […] strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white" (Gilman, 1996, p.152). If this can be seen as a metaphor of women's oppression and death in the limited domestic space, the victims in Gilead were no longer a metaphor. Their death was for real. "There [inside the room] were always two of us" (Atwood, 1996, p.305), Offred said, referring to herself and the previous handmaid who hung herself. The Wall in Gilead can also be considered as an extension of Jane's wallpaper. It had "floodlights mounted on metal posts [and] barbed wire [and] broken glass set in concrete along the top" (p.41) to scare those who might try to climb through. They hung bodies of rebels by the necks on the Wall, reminding us of those women figures strangled under the wallpaper. The two walls in both texts are projections of women's fear, fear of being cut off in a prisonlike room and being smothered and persecuted.

Jane and Offred, nonetheless, did not surrender to their imprisonment that easily. Though there was not much they can do, both examined and explored their limited space closely, hoping to gain a sense of control and to find a way out. In the end, Jane ripped off all the wicked wallpaper and locked herself up in the room. Clearly she saw no hope of getting out of the room, and thus she transformed the room to her own and kept John and his complice outside. As Wendy Gan noted, "[c]apturing a room to oneself, be it a study within the home or a rented room, could provide a woman with opportunities to enjoy privacy within the private sphere", Jane's locking herself up in the room and throwing the key away is also a defying act to resist John's patriarchal power and to fight for her last space. There are different views about the ending concerning this point. For some critics like Vertinsky (2001), it's "a subtle form of growth, a way to health and a rejection of and escape from an insane society" (p.66). According to Edberg-Caldwell (1997), however, it's an ominous ending: Jane was "confined in a room of madness […] There is no escape; there is no way out" (p.102). It is true that Jane explored the room, peeled off the patriarchal wallpaper and even thought about burning the whole colonial mansion down like Bertha did in *Jane Eyre*. But she still didn't step outside the room. Even in her triumphant moment over John's body, she was still creeping, not standing up right. Locking herself up and keeping the room to herself is a brave act, but tainted

with a tragic note. With respect to Offred, her ending is more ambiguous. She did fight for power, and even hid a matchstick that might be used to burn the whole house down. But she lost her courage, and admitted "[f]atigue is here, in [her] body, in [her] legs and eyes. That's what gets you in the end" (Atwood, 1996, p.304). She was taken out of the room by Nick who might be a spy and a rescuer at once. Whether her future would be in a free land or in another confining prison cell is beyond our knowledge.

2. SILENCED VOICE

In both works, women were kept away from language; their voice was low, couldn't be heard in the symbolic order. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, John decreed that his wife shouldn't do anything, especially writing, and he hypocritically added that it was for her own good. Whenever Jane wanted to write, she had to "be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (Gilman, 2002, p.142). It's the same case in the Republic of Gilead, only the opposition became the law: if women were discovered reading or writing, even mere characters, they would meet severe punishment; once they were caught the third time, their hands would be cut off, which reminds us of the punishment for thieves. For the misogynistic authority in Gilead, women who read and write were indeed thieves; in Gilead, only men had the exclusive right and access to the sphere of language and signifier, women who attempted to read and write would commit the crime of theft – they might steal their power. Just as the possible candidate for Commander Fred Judd said, "[their] big mistake was teaching [women] to read. [They] won't do that again" (Atwood, 1996, p.320). In Gilead, they would cut women off from the sphere of language and symbolic order, strip off women's ways to voice out and silence them forever.

Those males in power in both texts tried hard to retain their power over language and voice. John in YW was the one who was always talking and never listened to Jane, occupying the sphere of voice. In the beginning part of Gilman's story, lots of paragraphs start with "he said…he said…", while his wife Jane's voice was always interrupted by his and became a murmur in her own mind. In Gilead, the Commanders were just like John. For instance, when the Commander in charge of service came forward and "gaze[d] over the room, [women's] soft voices die […] his voice [went] into the microphone and out through the speakers […] as if it was being made not by his mouth, his body, but by the speakers themselves" (p.230). They made sure it was their voice that went into the microphone, the sphere of language and signifier, and they pretended their voice or signifier was always there in the sphere, not coined by them, as if this had justified their cause. They fully recognized "the connection between the male control of language and male power" (Bouson, 1993, p.148), and decreed what were forbidden words (such as "free" and "sterile"), and what were not. They even wouldn't let women see the already tempered Bible, on which they built the Gilead republic – they were afraid of what women might voice out.

Cixous (2009) once summarized that women were "confined to the narrow room in which they've been given a deadly brainwashing" (p.418). Women characters in both works were surely confined; no room was left for them in symbolic order since they cannot get in in the first place. They were being brainwashed, being told repetitively what they should believe and being turned into docile dolls. John was always telling Jane what she ought to do — control herself and put her fantasy away. And he would "read to [her] till it tired [her] head" (Gilman, 2002, p.147). Here we may wonder, what was he reading to her? The most likely thing would be his set of values, wrapped up in whatever cover, making Jane tired. In Gilead, the brainwash started from the biblical Rachel and Bilhah story. Unable to conceive a baby, Rachel gave her servant Bilhah to her husband Jacob to breed for them. This male-written text in Bible became the foremost justification for the Commanders. They would read it to the household every time before the monstrous sex ceremony began, making it a routine, a most familiar voice in their mind. Besides, the media were fully exploited as well. News were no longer true; it "could be old clips, it could be faked" and they "show[ed] only victories, never defeats" (Atwood, 1996, p.91-2). It was a strategy to fool and to brainwash, telling people all the things they should believe. Even before they staged the massacre in Congress, they had already been using this tactic. By then they employed a woman, Serena Joy, who gave speeches on TV preaching "the sanctity of the home [and] how women should stay home" (p.55), to make their following events go smoother. The Aunts in Gilead performed the same role as former Serena Joy. At the Red Centre they forced the handmaids to memorize what they said, their voice "was wheedling, conspiratorial" (p.28), striving to squeeze into the handmaids' mind.

Under such suffocating conditions, both Jane and Offred suffered the fear and pain of being cut off from the sphere of language and voice. It was so easy to be cut off, just like women's bank account, invalidated in the system simply by Commanders' wiping out the accounts with the character F (female). As Offred said, "[a]ll they need to do is push a few buttons. [They] are cut off […] [she] feel[s] as if somebody cut off [her] feet" (Atwood, 1996, p.187-88), painful and silenced. The two protagonists, nonetheless, were too resilient to end like that. They struggled on, fighting to voice out, to enter the sphere of language. One used writing and the other tapes, both voiced back, "rejecting the colonization of their minds, talk[ing] back from the peripheries to which society relegated them" (Mohr, 2005, p.263).

To resist the patriarchal power that desired to cut them

off, both Jane and Offred were trying to reach for readers or audiences. Jane wrote, "I'll tell you why – privately […] but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much" (Gilman, 2002, p.152). Clearly she believed there were readers, who listened to her voice attentively; she even gained additional power, holding back information and tempting her readers. Offred's telling was even more forceful: "I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (Atwood, 1996, p.279). Her telling generated audiences; it's her telling that brought them into being. Both broke the cut-off and segregated state, getting their voice heard.

They also used narration to gain power and fight back. Offred often explored and wrestled with words. She differentiated "lie" from "lay" by pointing out which had passive connotations; she contemplated the "it" referring to a life when one was to kill "it"; she examined words like "chair" and "household". All her exploration of words deals with the power relation behind these signifiers. She dragged the hidden power relation out and displayed it, accusing the dirty deal made in the sphere of language. She further created a narration that consists of multi-version realities with a postmodern taint. When she related the possible ending of Luke and Moira, she offered several versions. They might be dead, but they might be alive as well. Her narration gave life to them, and at the same time brought strength for herself. Besides, both adopted an ironic tone to laugh at those in power. As an illustration, when Aunt Lydia was fumbling with the paper and showing power before them, Offred sneered in her mind: "Obscene" (Atwood, 1996, p.287). Those who played power over others were obscene; she shouted and protested in her mind, quite the opposite to what she was supposed to think. And when she was supposed to say pious prayers, she whispered "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (Atwood, 1996, p.101), i.e. "Don't let the bastards grind you down". As Bouson (1993) observed, it is "a whispered obscenity about those in power which is secretly passed from one Handmaid to another" (p.149). She actually defiantly laughed at those in power with this bitter ironic joke. In YW, Jane was good at mocking as well, quipped that "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (Gilman, 2002, p.141). This one single sentence pointed out the hypocrisy of John and of patriarchal marriage, in which John assumed he was the superior being who can look down upon and silence his wife. This ironic and mocking voice of Jane's continued and became louder and harsher as the story evolves. In the former part of the story, the sarcastic tone is found between the lines, more or less avoiding attention; while in the latter part, the narrator tended to be bolder and to speak out. For instance, earlier in the story, Jane would repetitively say "[h]e is very careful and loving" (p.142) just after John had done something actually quite the opposite. But near the end of the story, she directly spoke out that he "pretended to be very loving and kind. As if [she] couldn't see through him!" (p.153). As the narration develops further, Jane gradually found her own voice (though written on the paper), and became more assured, no longer hiding her mocking attitude between the lines. To the very end, she spoke out in front of John and insisted her voice, which "silence[d] him for a few moments" (p.155) and finally made John faint. Here Jane at last won back some right to assert her own voice. "[W]it and laughter are among the best forms not just of self-protective detachment but of resistance to oppression" (Thompson, 1997, p.73), and both grasped the opportunities to resist oppression and used them well. In a way, they jumped out from the limbo where the patriarchal authority imprisoned them and fought back.

The ending of both texts, however, were not that promising. Writing was a relief for Jane, but gradually she found that she "[got] pretty tired when [she] tr[ied to write]" (Gilman, 2002, p.144) and "the effort [was] getting to be greater than the relief" (p.147). She felt less capable of writing, as if writing had became the most exhausting and demanding work, as if there had been something hindering her in language itself. The opposition planted inside the system of language and discourse was hard to conquer, like a sly enemy, making Jane tired. Things were no better for Offred, either. Though her narration broke the segregation and her voice outlived Gilead's, it was closely followed by Professor Pieixoto's speech, which accused Offred's narration as "malicious invention" (Atwood, 1996, p.321) simply because the name "Serena Joy" didn't fit into the assumed Wife for Commander Fred in his findings. He further remarked with a condescending tone, that "had she had a different turn of mind, [s]he could have told [them] much" (p.322). Both would found with horror that their voice was still more or less circumvented or muffled.

CONCLUSION

Though *The Yellow Wallpaper* was published in late Victorian age and *The Handmaid's Tale* almost a century later, both deal with the fear of being governed and imprisoned by patriarchal authority. Jane and Offred were pushed into a limited domestic space. The rooms they lived in were like prison cells, sinister and suffocating, keeping them under surveillance and strict control. To fight for the last personal space, Jane chose to lock herself up in the room and let no one in, hoping to transform the confining room to a room of her own. Offred, however, lost her courage in the end despite her former struggling. When she was finally taken out of the room, she was even reluctant to move, afraid of what might come next. Whether she was freed or not remained a mystery.

Besides, both characters' voice tended to be silenced by the patriarchal authority. John was the one who always talked and interrupted Jane's voice, which was kept suppressed until the very end. Offred, in the misogynistic Republic of Gilead, was forbidden to read and write; to voice out would be risking her life. The two women characters, nonetheless, still managed to voice back, one by writing and the other by tape recording. They fully exploited the potential of narration, trying to be heard. But for Jane, writing gradually became an exhausting task. Even though she made John speechless and faint for a while, what John would do when he regained his consciousness would be a chilling thought to dwell upon. As for Offred's voice, though it outlived Republic of Gilead, it was still circumvented by a condescending professor, who actually adapted and edited her tape recording. Thus, in both works, the two characters found themselves in danger of being cut off and segregated in a limited claustrophobic space.

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