



Tracking the Idea of Gothic in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Abstract

Today, the idea of Gothic is talked about as a global phenomenon that transcends its Western origins and traditional narrative while establishing the aesthetic as a common practice. The constant development of this phenomenon opens up several fresh possibilities for literary inventiveness from all around the world. The elements like displacement, violence, loss, suffering, solitude, misery, trauma, horror, grief, fantasy, otherness, regret, abjection, and shame are all undeniably related to gothic and that can be easily identified in numerous Indian writings that can surely be studied via gothic lens. The present paper explores how different writers from different geographical locations use the idea of gothic in some or other way to solve their purposes. Further it studies "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* simultaneously through the lens of gothic and, in this way, highlights the similarities and differences in their characterisation, themes, setting and imagery.

The gothic undertones are quite noticeable in both of the selected narratives, that help to strengthen the points of view of their writers. These narratives offer strategies to defamiliarize the idea of gothic itself. Both the writers purposefully disrupt the idea of gothic by placing their female characters at the centre of everything that happens in the plot rather than depicting them as passive figures that used to happen in traditional gothic narratives. Due to feminist transformations, over the time, in the socio-cultural milieu, the role of women in these gothic narratives is no more presented under the societal pressure of passivity. The history of gothic narratives is inextricably linked to the history of women. The relationship of readers and writers to the 'supernatural' appears counterintuitive given the traditional parameters within which 'female identity' is confined. Women continue to dominate the gothic horror genre, where Stephen King and his contemporaries enjoy widespread acclaim, and they have carved out space for their voices in the literary tradition. Women writers, however, have written gothic narratives as a recuperation of, and escape from, the inequity to which they have been laid open, as both the original and present-day quintessence of gothic. A gothic story written by a woman is a story about arbitrary restrictions, rebellion, and a refusal to recognise the boundaries imposed by a world of limited imagination. It is a reminder of literature's ability to challenge traditional notions of identity and inhabit unrepresented regions with powerful reminders of the breadth of imagination. The idea of gothic is more likely to induce 'fear' and 'horror' as a result



of a woman's threat, which poses the question of why women are valued for inducing severe anxiety. The reason for it is, perhaps "A woman shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror" (Braidotti 58).

Despite coming from distinct cultural backgrounds, Gilman and Desai share the urge to use gothic undertones and strong female protagonists to portray their stories. They both extensively examine women's minds by utilising a variety of gothic metaphors. The notion of "fear" has been chosen to analyse these narratives since it is impossible to study all of the different cultures that gothic novels deal with at once, keeping the present study small. Ellen Moers, in *Literary Women* also affirms that "The Gothic is not so easily stated except that it has to do with 'fear'" (90). She elucidates that the purpose of 'Gothic' unlike 'Tragedy' is not "to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with 'pity' and 'fear' but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear" (91). This research paper compares and contrasts the "fears" of the dominant female characters in these chosen narratives on "oppressive societal and cultural norms." Without a question, the gothic allows female writers more autonomous platforms to share their perspectives, but it also implies that there are still barriers in place for them even in the twenty-first century.

Female Gothic narratives, in fact, talks about women "who are imperilled in some way, with the addition that the female protagonist is often trapped by either circumstances or a mouldering castle or both" (De LaMotte 234). The concept of gothic aids in encapsulating women's perceptions in these novels. The authors employ ghosts, labyrinths, deserted manors, and distorted psyches as metaphors for what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. In these works, the idea of "entrapment," whether it be physical, psychological, or both, is successful in arousing "horror" in both readers and characters. While both stories feature many traditional Gothic elements, they also share a common storyline about "tyranny" and "freedom," which is shown through complex Gothic settings, imagery, and tones as viewed through the eyes of female characters on the point of insanity. The story of a woman who is forced into a state of 'madness' as a result of the 'rest-cure,' a purported solution for various nervous issues in women of the time, is told in "The Yellow Wallpaper." On the other hand, Maya finds herself ensnared in the repressive conventions of marriage, sexism, and superstitions in *Cry, the Peacock*. Maya is portrayed by Desai as a rebel fighting the patriarchal culture's ghostly forces.

The engagement of a kind of gothic imagery and symbolism represent the mental states of these female protagonists. The central symbol of 'peacock's cry' in *Cry, the Peacock* indicates entrapped Maya's anxieties and cravings as she utters, "But sleep was rent by the frenzied cries of peacocks



spacing he rocks at night, peacocks searching for mates, peacocks tearing themselves to bleeding shreds in the act of love, peacocks screaming with agony at the death of love” (Desai 146). In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the main symbol of ‘wallpaper’ denotes the familial, therapy, and practise structure in which the anonymous narrator feels imprisoned. The tension in the story is heightened by the usage of wallpaper. It contains a sub-pattern that shows a woman in agony, scowling and crouching to look for a way out of the main pattern, which mimics prison bars. According to the unnamed narrator, this prison is decorated with numerous women's bodies, many of whom are suffocating as they long to be free. Maya is drawn to the thought of death by the peacock's cries, which is a common gothic refrain. She in the end kills Gautama as incited by the ‘fear of death,’ “It was I, I who screamed with the peacocks, screamed at the sight of the rainclouds, screamed at their disappearance, screamed in mute horror” (146). Both the ‘peacock’s cry and the ‘wallpaper’ enhance the concept of ‘fear’ in these novels.

In gothic stories, imagery and symbols play a crucial part because they convey the characters’ internal conflicts. This is accomplished through the employment of various hues in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Cry, the Peacock*. Wimsatt and Brooks in *Literary Criticism: A Short History* also suggest “Every colour, sound, odour, emotion and every visual image has its correspondence in traits of human self” (135). The narrative’s titular ‘yellow wallpaper’ almost becomes an entity; a metaphor for a sick woman’s inactivity. The title *Cry, The Peacock* implies “the dance of peacock as both the dance of life and the dance of death” (Rao 17). Maya’s desire for a colourful existence is symbolised by the colour red, which is the colour of married life in Indian tradition. Progressively, it turns into a vital vein of ferocity as Maya herself recognizes “A thousand drops of blood, a thousand ruby red hammer show red across her vision” The white colour, whereas, is indicative of “dreariness and indifference on one hand and eeriness and fragility on the other” (Pathak 101). As a result, the colours and their varying interpretations mirror the characters’ moods and feelings, as well as their deepest fears and desires.

In these stories, the place and surroundings take on the role of characters. “The Yellow Wallpaper” depicts a long-abandoned ‘ancestral land,’ a classic gothic setting in which the protagonist is scared to hear that her husband has picked the upper-floor nursery for her. The place is covered in a distressing yellow wallpaper; the form of which “commits every artistic sin” (Gilman 427). Maya’s house in *Cry, the Peacock* is likewise haunted, as she feels alone even when she is with her spouse. She explains “His coldness and incessant talks of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk, and talking, reveal myself. It is that - my loneliness in this house” (Desai 14). Maya, apart from being isolated, also feels “sexually starved, emotionally enervated, and intellectually overfed; she



expects emotional and physical satisfaction in her married life but gets cold intellectuality and insensitivity from her husband” (Devika 242). Barbara Patrick in “Lady Terrorists: Nineteenth-century American Women Writers and the Ghost Story,” utters in the similar vein, “Especially significant in women’s ghost stories is their depiction of the home. Far from being a safe haven, the home is a place of stultification, exhaustion, treachery and terror” (75). The demonstration of a weighty bedframe that is attached to the ground in “The Yellow Wallpaper” are distinctions of an idea ranging from an appearance of the unnamed narrator’s “static sexuality” (Scharnhorst 18) towards “a sexual crucifixion” (Johnson 523). The ‘madness’ of the narrator here can be perceived as “an expression of long-suppressed rage” (522).

The typical gothic themes of feminine desires and their contradictory actions are present in both stories. The 'prophecy' of an astrologer that either Maya or her husband would pass away in their fourth year of marriage has troubled her for years. This intensify her “obsessional neurosis and keeps gnawing at the core of her being like an oversized pest feeding on a tender leaf” (Rajeshwar 15). In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator/protagonist suffers from postnatal psychosis; the situation worsens when her patriarchal figure husband wants her to “rest” in attempt to resolve the situation, forcing her to reside in a prison-like house. Desai and Gilman both use gothic as a tool to subvert patriarchal order and social norms, magnifying the impact of their own viewpoints. The story heavily emphasises the themes of sorrow, loss, and death. Through the realistic and skilful distribution of these ideas, Desai successfully communicates to the readers the struggle of the characters and the medium. Here, Gothic is open for investigation. The story's tragic ending instils the deepest gothic horror. Sigmund Freud in *A General Guide to Psychoanalysis* puts that ‘Introversion’ is often a distinctive symptom of neurosis, as he writes- “Introversion describes the deflection of the libido away from the possibilities of real satisfaction and its excessive accumulation upon phantasies previously tolerated as harmless” (363). He further extends by saying that “An introverted person... is in an unstable condition; the next disturbance of the shifting forces will cause symptoms to develop, unless he can yet find other outlets for his pent-up libido” (366). Due to their extreme sensitivity, ongoing anxiety, and the possibility of childlessness, both female characters are removed from their normal lives and are instead transformed into neurotic gothic heroines who are powerless to stand up for themselves.

Cry, the Peacock conveys the technique of ‘stream of consciousness’ to represent “The unbroken flow of perceptions, thoughts and feelings in the waking mind” (Abrams 298) and also “to illustrate internal disruption of a hitherto smooth flow of thought, action and events” (Kehinde 182) It is possible to communicate the disarray in Maya's inner consciousness because things take long to happen in her world, a place of superstition, pessimism, and horror. Throughout “The Yellow



Wallpaper,” the technique of an ‘unnamed narrator’ reinforces the motif of confusion that suggests the lack of her identification as “Again and again, women writers found in the supernatural tales, metaphors for the unredressed wrongs women have suffered, for the invisibility of women’s work, and for women’s emotional, social and political oppression” (Patrick 76). The ‘madness’ of the protagonist is irrefutable owing to circumstances. As the readers reads the story “The narrator reads the wallpaper, and she sees in it her own suppressed self” (King and Morris 32). As a result, pulling down the wallpaper represents the end of her ‘other’ self.

Maya, on the other hand, is still working to make a name for herself in a society that is predominately male. Her murderous deed is an expression of her discontent with stereotypical gothic plotlines in which women are presented as little more than tools for their male counterparts. Many western gothic stories, even those authored by women, do not portray their female protagonists as strong and on par with their male counterparts, as Maya does. Maya's attempt to overthrow the entire social order is symbolised by her murder of Gautama. As Maya utters also “All order is gone out of my life, all formality, there is no plan, no peace nothing to keep me with the pattern of familiar, everything living and doing” (Desai 195). Incorporating assertive and intellectual heroines rather than docile and emotionally motivated ones, today’s ‘Female Gothic’ narratives clearly stand against unfavourable socio-cultural stereotypes about women. The settlement of female characters in these narratives as dominant beings articulate “The dissatisfactions with patriarchal structures and offering a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body” (Wallace and Smith 3). The anguish of women is emphasised in gothic literature. The gothic genre may be reduced to a metaphor for the representation of mute, weak, and disempowered women in patriarchal societies by the liminal state of a ghost, which is an existence caught between life and death, presence and absence, consciousness and invisibility, materiality and immateriality. ‘Neurosis’ is a medical term and as Gautam accuses her of being neurotic shows a male’s rational thinking process. Many of the passages in “The Yellow Wallpaper” regarding “the husband can also be understood as containing sarcasm, a great numerous contain irony, and several border on parody” (Johnson 528). The pattern of the yellow wallpaper symbolizes the isolation of the narrator “At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be” (Gilman 456). In an effort to free the woman behind her, the narrator rips the paper out of the wall at the top of the storey. The act of tearing down the jail sign is a reflection of the narrator's desire to be alive. The narrator is presented as an artist and a writer and “it is through her writing her suppressed rage becomes apparent” (Johnson 522). Maya is haunted by the ‘prophecy’ that she or her spouse will die in the fourth year of their lives in *Cry, the Peacock*.



It drives her insane, and she eventually kills herself. In her situation, the fear of death is constantly shifting in the direction of hallucinations. Maya's hallucination can be cited in the following line, "In search of glory, the neurotic Maya starts making neurotic claims on the world...It is humanly impossible to live upon the standards laid down by image. When it is not realized, a person feels worthless and develops a despised image. This is his despised self" (Bande 32)

In gothic stories, there are established traditions for the setting, theme, point of view, and characterization. Gilman employed the idea of the gothic to create the dread, mystery, and tension required for captivating storytelling. In addition, she uses Gothic allusions to highlight the plight of women in patriarchal societies. She uses several gothic tropes, like the sense of being trapped, remote locations, and mental health issues. Despite the fact that Desai makes use of all of these gothic traditions, her primary objective in doing so is still to improve the impact of her writing. She values reality over imagination more strongly. Gilman, on the other hand, gives equal weight to both requirements, emphasising both the need to effectively communicate her viewpoint and create a gothic atmosphere in order to make her novels more engrossing to read. Both authors use the idea of gothic to communicate how they feel about the predicament of women, but Desai gives her female characters more strength and life. Her female characters do make efforts to improve their lot in life. Gilman's characters, on the other hand, don't change as much and don't take a stand against patriarchal culture. Despite the fact that Desai's stories, unlike Gilman's, are not strictly gothic, the gothic theme that they integrate makes them worthwhile to analyse within the gothic terms. The issues that have been used in all these narratives, of course, get attention in the narratives other than gothic but perhaps, "The idea of Gothic, in its traffic with fear, sharpens our sense of how women might be more vulnerable physically, politically, socially and emotionally in certain situations than men" (Horner & Zlosnik 127).

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