

Spatial Metaphor of 'room' in Virginia Woolf's

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN And Charlotte Perkins Gilman's THE YELLOW WALLPAPER: A Feminist Approach

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ABSTRACT

Almost all of Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins' works are about women's suffering in a patriarchal society, the society that "promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered." (Johnson, 2014: p.5) In the context of spatiality, women and men are literally segregated in a patriarchal society by assigning women to domestic space and men to public space. In fact, this unjust segregation in spaces leads to much more limitation of women's daily interactions and experiences compared to men. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* both deal with women's spatial experience. The two feminist writers try to explore the concept of space and relate it to women's role in society. Actually, the American and European women have been submitted to an unfair rank in the social paradigm due to the gender roles, which excluded them from the public activities, depriving them from their rights in education or work. The two writers have always tried to draw their readers' attention to the fact that women's mental and intellectual capabilities could successfully contribute to build a conscious, educated society. Cleverly, with the ingenuity of a literary writer, the two writers use the spatial metaphor of "room" in its both senses, the physical and spiritual, to depict women's eternal state of undergoing pain and anguish. However, the metaphor of "room" comes in different meanings in the literary works of the two writers. On the one hand, it means freedom and independence in Virginia Woolf's *The Room of One's Own*, and on the other hand, it means spiritual and physical confinement in Charlotte Perkins' *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The present paper studies the different meanings of the spatial metaphor "room" in the works of the two prominent writers.

Key Words: feminism, education, room, patriarchy, spatial metaphor

المجاز المكاني ل "غرفة" في فرجينيا وولف " الغرفة الخاصة بها"، و "ورق الحائط الاصفر" لشارلوت بيركنز - مقارنة انثوية

ملخص

تدور جميع أعمال فرجينيا وولف وشارلوت بيركنز تقريباً حول معاناة النساء في المجتمع الأبوي ، وهو المجتمع الذي "يعزز امتياز الذكور ويتم تحديده من قبل ، ويتمحور حول الذكور" (جونسون ، ٢٠١٤ : ص ٥) في سياق الحيز المكاني ، يتم فصل النساء والرجال حرفياً في مجتمع أبوي من خلال حصر دور النساء في المنزل والرجال في الأماكن العامة. في الواقع ، يؤدي هذا الفصل غير العادل في الأماكن إلى المزيد من القيود على تفاعلات النساء اليومية وخبراتهم مقارنة بالرجال. تناقش كل من (ورق الحائط الاصفر) لشارلوت بيركنز جيلمان و (غرفة خاصة بها) لفرجينيا وولف مع التجربة المكانية للمرأة. تحاول الكاتبتان النسويتان

استكشاف مفهوم " المكان " وربطه بدور المرأة في المجتمع. في الواقع ، تم وضع المرأة في مرتبة غير عادلة في النموذج الاجتماعي بسبب أدوار الجنسين ، مما أدى إلى استبعادها من الأنشطة العامة وحرمانها من حقوقها في التعليم أو العمل. علاوة على ذلك ، حاولت الكاتبتان دائماً لفت انتباه قرائهما إلى حقيقة أن القدرات العقلية والفكرية للمرأة يمكن أن تساهم بنجاح في بناء مجتمع واعي ومتعلم. بذكاء ، مع براعة الكاتب الأدبي ، استخدمت الكاتبتان الاستعارة المكانية لـ "الغرفة" في معانيها ، الجسدي والروحي ، لتصوير الحالة الأبدية للمرأة من المعاناة والألم. ومع ذلك ، فإن استعارة "الغرفة" تأتي في معاني مختلفة في أدب الكاتبتين . من ناحية ان مفهوم "غرفة" يعني الحرية والاستقلال في مقالة فرجينيا وولف (غرفة خاصة بها) ، ومن ناحية أخرى ، فإنها تعني السجن الروحي والجسدي في (ورق الحائط الأصفر) لشارلوت بيركنز. يدرس البحث المعاني المختلفة للاستعارة المكانية "الغرفة" في أعمال الكاتبتين البارزتين.

INTRODUCTION

During the early twentieth century, social traditions established by male-dominated society has emphasized inequality between men and women. As social status of men and women were separated in terms of spatial use as well –‘public space for men’ and ‘private (domestic) space for women’– women’s role in society has been greatly limited compared to men. (Massey,1994 :p.4)

These gendered places of public and private notions originated in exclusionary and patriarchal societies’ sexual , economic, and political norms. The norms that grant public space to men’s dominance while restricting women to private space. For Rendell, this concept that “divides the city from home, public from private, production from reproduction, and men from women is both patriarchal and capitalist”. The traditional concept of space in the early twentieth century excluded women from sharing men’s spatial practices and promoting male-dominated social authority. Spain indicates that:

“the separation of public and private through spatiality has developed over centuries through social and cultural norms; these standardized gender roles have caused gender discrimination by giving men complete spatial access while minimizing women’s. Therefore, the male-dominated realm that produces private(domestic) and public concepts.” (Spain, 1992:P.8).

According to Helen Cixous “women’s relationship to their bodies has been problematic since the ancient times.” Imprisoned in the function of the body by the “rational, disembodied” men, women have been diminished to sexual beings to be looked at or to be owned, and because of their reproductive materiality, they have been dismissed from the public space and consigned to an inferior rank or position represented by the private space of the house. (Cixous,1975:P.12). Moira Gatens wrote on the generative and symbolism of vessel and women: “the female body in our culture, is seen and no doubt often ‘lived’ as an envelope, vessel, or receptacle” (Gatens,2011:P.18)

As Elizabeth Grosz believes that, “biologism is often based on some form of reductionism in that social and cultural factors are seen to be the effects of biological causes.” (Grosz,1992:P.48) As long as women are assigned to the tasks of reproduction and nurturance, they are actually limited by society, socially and psychologically. Women’s capacities have been denied to take an equal position and place in society.. (Grosz,1992 :P.241) In a similar manner Kathleen M. Kirby accentuates the link between the female body and space:

“Gender ideology . . . not only determines our interactions in space, but defines us as space. “Woman” connotes a space that is penetrable, susceptible, passive, submissive, imploding, collapsing upon itself; “man” derives from a space assumed to be expansive, rigid and intrusive.”

(Grosz, 1995: P.137)

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman(1860-1935), two of the leading feminist and modernist writers of their era, were aware of these invisible patriarchal and androcentric norms that narrowed women’s freedom concerning spatial experiences. By means of their literary works, the two prominent writers succeeded in conveying their human message to their readers and telling them how this social system imprisoned women within assigned roles. Women are expected to be just stay-at-home wives and mothers; they are reliant on their domestic role to please their husbands so that they would financially support their families.

In most of their literary works, like Woolf’s protagonists in *The Years*,

Three Guineas and *The Pargiter* and Gilman’s *What Diantha Did* and *Herland*, the two writers highlight the restrictive spatial practices that need to be changed in order for society to develop. They always tried to attract their reader’s attention to their female protagonists’ suffering and lead the reader to think about the new layers of spatial meaning (Uz Sönmez, 2007:P.23).

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf cleverly creates a situation through which she is able to show the important position of women in avoiding their countries falling into wars. *Three Guineas* is a book-length essay structured as a letter from Virginia Woolf to an unnamed correspondent who has asked her for help in his efforts to “prevent war”. The unnamed man has asked “her” for help to prevent future wars. She explains that the cause of wars is the patriarchal society that excluded women from public places and diminished their important role in building their societies. Even though women’s work is no less than men’s, still they are thought to be inferior to men. Confidently, the man in the letter tells Woolf that the best way to avoid wars is through joining anti-war groups and societies, and donating to anti-war causes. Woolf

labels these thoughts as unmaturred and weak and laments the fact that women's influence in their societies is much less than the influence of men. Woolf finished her essay by stating that it is not possible to stop war without stopping patriarchy. (Lee,1999:P.xiv)

Woolf believes that women are mentally different from men, so their anti-war efforts must be different. If women were given the chance to have good education and learning, society would benefit from their knowledge. (Marcus,1981 :P.79)Woolf admits that women should be educated without any condition . In fact, women's access to money and education is controlled by men, so women's ability to influence the world is limited. In her literary essays, Woolf always advises women to have their own entity and their own interests instead of propping up existing patriarchal institutions.

Really, Virginia Woolf has wonderful ideas that no one has touched upon before. She is not like other feminists, motivated by hatred and envy for men. Moreover, she is very logical in her views and she does not renew any justification for hatred between the sexes: she always believed that they are complementary to each other. Mostly, her advice to women is to adhere to their principles and morals in getting their rights and not to take action just for money or revenge. Woolf's writings provide many examples of women who are able to work without necessarily sacrificing their morals. According to her, only uncontaminated woman can make her society better ; the one who is not ready to make any kind of concession can even prevent war.(Ibid)

Woolf does not forget to criticize the Church of England for not allowing women to join the clergy.

In *Herland*, Gilman creates a utopian feminist society away from dominant role of men in an androcentric, patriarchal society. She does that by isolating a group of women "geographically" from men. She put the women in a deserted land to manage their own affairs without the help of men. Although, the situation of Gilman's novel is imaginary, the theme is realistic, the experiment is designed to "test" the range of female capability against contemporary gender stereotypes.

The relationship between women and houses has always been complex. Many of the literary works have employed the space of the house to describe women's struggle with the society of their time. Houses in literary works can symbolize a place of physical, moral and psychological restrictions. However, in many other works, they often function as a metaphor for social and economic freedom.

This usage is particularly explicit in works written in the nineteenth and twentieth century, when constraints on women's roles were changing: "anxieties about space sometimes seem to dominate the literature of both nineteenth-century women and their twentieth-century descendants."

According to Klaske Havik, a Professor Methods of Analysis and Imagination,

“that literary spaces are often formed by the narrator’s experiences, memories, and realities. The physical characteristics portrayed by narrators, such as the urban scene, buildings, streets, interiors, or decors, unavoidably reflect their persona and ideas. They become elements that shape their narratives and provide the time and space-related characteristics and social structure of the depicted society. Thus, by examining the narrator’s spatial representations, the reader can trace historical information and reveal socio-spatial issues that hitherto remained either unresolved or unmentioned.”

(Havik, K.,2006:P.37).

Symbol of ‘room’ in Virginia’s A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

A Room of One’s Own is viewed as “first modern text of feminist criticism, the model in both theory and practically socialist feminist of a specifically socialist feminist criticism” (Marcus, 1981:P.216). According to the critic Jane Goldman, “undoubtedly Woolf’s most important contribution to literary criticism and Theory.” (Goldman,2012:P.97)

A Room of One’s Own is based on two lectures that Virginia Woolf presented in 1928 at Newnham and Girton colleges, women's colleges at Cambridge University. She expanded the lectures and published them together as one long essay in 1929. In her lecture, Woolf starts with the subject of women and fiction, but quickly expands into the wider issue of sexism and art and their impact on women's creativity.

When Virginia Woolf was asked to give a lecture in women college, she actually went through a state of preoccupation with thinking about the subject. The subject was about women and it was a good occasion for her to deliver an influential lesson on it. She explained to her audience that as soon as she had received the invitation, she had begun to think what she would say about women? Actually, there were many choices in front Woolf to discuss about women. In fact, Woolf left her thoughts taking her to different realms about the interesting subject, hoping that her audience would conclude a " highly controversial " conclusion on women;

“At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial
- and any question about sex is that - one cannot hope to
tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold
whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's
audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as
they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies
of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain
more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of
all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the
story of the two days that preceded my coming here -
how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which you
have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it, and made it
work in and out of my daily life.” (Woolf,1977:P.8)

Right from the beginning, Woolf tells her audiens that “A woman must have
money and a ‘room’ of her own if she is to write fiction .”(Woolf,1977:P.7) she
spared no effort to present her subject in the best way, by conveying her original
thoughts in a kind of fictional situation rather than a mere essay. It is said if one
wants to make his words more influential let one put them in a mold of a story. She
begins her essay by telling a story of a female character who studies at the university
of Vinnham which is a university for girls. The woman visits Oxbridge University, a
university where men study, and then the narrator sets out to discuss the differences
that prevail in the society of men and women. Of course the names of the universities
are fictional;

“I need not say that what
I am about to describe has no existence; Oxbridge is an
invention; so is Fernham; 'It' is only a convenient term for
somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my
lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with
them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide
whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will
of course throw the whole of it into the waste-paper
basket and forget all about it.”(Woolf,1977:P.8)

As Woolf considers her topic, she reaches an interesting conclusion: women in
literature have little in common with actual women—a woman becomes an "odd
monster" when one compares fact to fiction. Female characters such as “Antigone”,

“the Wife of Bath”, “Juliet”, “Penelope”, and “Cleopatra” have some of the “most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature,” (Woolf,1977:P.11)but in reality, at the times these works were written, women could “hardly read, could scarcely spell, and [were] the property of [their] husband[s].” In the translated version of her work *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir states that “traditionally, humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (wikipedia)

women are, in fact, different from stories, as their role in life is limited to their domestic space and obligations to their family. Unfortunately, women can never be creative in reality. According to Morris, “a female narrative space is never opened up, and as readers we remain within the male point of view.” (Morris,1994:P.28) Woolf assumed a very accurate and intelligent hypothesis “to provide an example of an androgynous mind.” (Ryan,2013:P.59)She assumed that Shakespeare had a sister who was as skilled as him in literature, so would she get a chance like him and become as great as him ?:

“Imagine that William S hakespeare had a sister, as wonderfully

gifted as himself. But she was not sent to school . . . had no chance of learning grammar and logic . . . Before she was out of her teens she was to be betrothed . . . she cried out that marriage was hateful and was beaten by her father . . . She took the road to London . . . stood at the stage door; she wanted to act . Men laughed in her face . . . At last Nick

Greene

the actor- manager took pity on her; she found herself with child . . . and killed herself one winter's night.”

(Woolf,1977:P.52)

Woolf confirms that women would be creative if they only had a chance to educate themselves. Additionally, a woman is free if only she has a source from which she can make a living or get her daily sustenance, or else, her fate will be like that fate of Shakespeare's sister . Moreover, if women have this freedom in their life they will be no less than men;women writers such as “Austin” and “the Bronte” sisters were credited with laying the foundations for the women writers who would come after them.(Woolf,1977:P.22)

Woolf declares, “So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say.”(Ibid)

The inequality and disparity between the sexes is evident even in the buildings of the two colleges. Woolf showed how she felt the difference between the colleges: The building for men is huge and beautiful, makes one feel the importance of the place and the importance of those in the place as well. When she had her dinner with them, she enjoyed the pleasure of the quality of the food and also the intellectual

discussions. Everything is different from the college for girls. As the author thinks, the donors who built men's college were confident of the results of their plan which would also be great. Wealthy men support Oxbridge, but the students' mothers and grandmothers do not have the money to support Fernham. So, Fernham suffers because of women in charge of the college can not endow a fully equipped university.(Woolf,1977:P.90)

Woolf assures that a private place or a room, which of course could be provided only by money, is essential for the creative woman to become a great writer. The main obstacle that prevents women from developing, is poverty and class. The writer, she believes, must “communicate his experience with perfect fullness” that is:

“There must be freedom
and there must be peace. Not a wheel must grate,
not a light glimmer. The curtains must be close drawn.
The writer, I thought once his experience is over, must
lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in
darkness”(Woolf,1977:p.113)

Woolf strongly stresses that had it not been for her aunt's inheritance of an annual sum of money, she would not have been able to be what she is now: “my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman ... a view of the open sky.” The money of her aunt provided her with confidence and freedom and a large space. In fact, the intellectual freedom is what women need to be great writers. Women poets are rare in literature because:

“Intellectual freedom
depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon
intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor,
not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning
of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than
the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had
a dog's chance of writing poetry . That is why I have laid
so much stress on money and a room of one's
own.”(Woolf,1977:P.116)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a compelling short story of a woman who is suffering from symptoms of postpartum depression. Gilman's protagonist is an unnamed female narrator; an upper-middle-class female. John is her husband, he is a well-respected physician and her doctor. The husband looks after her as a doctor, confining her in one of the rooms in the family's house in the countryside. The room is covered with a yellow wallpaper and the woman becomes obsessed with the color of the room, especially after she imagines that there are some women who are trying to tear the paper and get out of the wall. The woman makes clear her experience of postpartum depression and consequently becomes estranged from reality.

"There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder -I begin to think -I wish John would take me away from here!" (Gilman,2022:P.6)

The story deals with the role of women in society which is insignificant, they cannot rely on themselves, but rather they are subordinate to men. The husband and her brother who is also a doctor advise the woman to get complete bed rest or what is called "rest-cure." The 'rest-cure' was used in the 1880's by American physician Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell. Showalter believes that "Mitchell was an outspoken misogynist, whose methods punished "deviant" and discontented women by forcing them into an allegedly therapeutic female role." (Showalter,1999:P.203) Despite her suggestions that she would like to write and read, her husband believed that she should stay in her 'room' and isolating herself from the world. "[These] confined women adopt the compulsive behaviors of caged animals," (Showalter,1999:P.203) Gilbert and Gubar wrote that "the confinement of pregnancy replicates the confinement of society." (Gilbert,2000;P.89) However, she does secretly write in a journal, and she refuses to be only a charming wife and a competent mother. Deciding to keep a secret journal, the protagonist begins to fantasise and conceal her actual thoughts. There is a division in her consciousness; perplexing her mind as to what is real and what is fantasy? Helplessly, the woman forces herself to believe that women are inferior to men although she "disagree[s] with their ideas." (Gilman,1898;P.2) Moreover, the woman is apparently contented that her husband and brother are of "high standing" and they should be right in their decision: (Micale,2019:P.34)

"If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with [...] what is one to do? My brother is also a physician [...] he says the same thing." (Gilman,2022:P.2)

Marginalized thier role in society, women face a unique set of challenges on account of their gender and community status, a form of intersectional discrimination that is often particularly difficult to address. The woman in Gilman's story is trapped between the walls of the room and the orders of her husband. She is prevented from contacting anyone, and she is forced to obey her husband in everything. Actually, through marriage the woman becomes like a property of her husband as. Valerie Bryson argues that women "should be educated equally and [...] should be able to live independently if they wished, rather than being forced by economic necessity to become the property of a man through marriage." (Bryson,1999:P.10)

Gilman shows the reader the seriousness of the situation, by making the woman's psychological state gradually deteriorate from a sense of insignificance, depression, and then madness.

The writer has made the woman's husband a psychiatrist in order to explain to the reader how doctors look at other women patients with the same symptoms. Doctors expect that they are just depressing symptoms, and women actually only need a complete 'rest-cure' and not practice any intellectual work. The intellectual work is harmful to women, as doctors believe, as well as social relations:

"My darling," said he, " I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one

instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?" (Gilman,2022:P.7)

In her autobiography *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* in 1935, Gilman describes how she "would sit blankly moving [her] head from side to side – to get out from under the pain. Not physical pain [...] mental torment." (Gilman,1898: p.96) It "required complete inactivity and weight gain over the period of a few weeks." (Smith,2006:P.2) Dr. Mitchell changed his way of treatment in 1935 after he read "the yellow wallpaper", Gilman mentions the significant incident in her autobiography:

"The real purpose of the story was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways. . . . Many years later, I met someone who said he had told them that he had changed his treatment of nervous prostration since reading 'The Yellow Wallpaper.' If that is a fact, I have not lived in vain."

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the two writers, Woolf and Gilman have excelled in presenting their thoughts on the suffering of women through the use of the symbol of the "room".

Through her article, Woolf emphasized the education of women and related it to the place in which they live. She stressed the fact that if women remain ignorant and without education, this would almost make half of society being idle and useless.

The writer used the word "room" to symbolize space, freedom, education and possibilities that should be granted to women so that they can exercise their role as individuals no less competent than men.

Freedom in education comes through creating the appropriate environment, and the establishment of educational institutions for women.

Woolf reinforced her ideas by giving examples from reality: by mentioning the names of female writers of high caliber such as Jane Austen and Emily Bronte who enriched English literature with their wonderful and timeless writings of comparable quality to those written by men.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is one of many stories that lost authority in the literary world because of an ideology that determines the works' content, to be disturbing or offensive. Critics such as the editor of the Atlantic Monthly rejected the short story because he could not forgive himself if he made others as miserable as he made himself. Lanser argues that the same argument of devastation and misery can be said about the work of Edgar Allan Poe, but his work is still printed and studied by academics.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work addresses the struggle in which a male-dominated medical institution attempts to suppress women. Gilman's works challenge the social construction of women in patriarchal medical discourse who are seen powerless and ineffectual. However, Gilman's most amazing achievement was that she was able to make Dr. Mitchell change his treatment method towards women.

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