



WOMEN AND WRITING: “SOCIAL STATUS OF AMERICAN WOMEN IN XIX – XX CENTURIES

Madaminova Umida Rustamovna

*Esp Teacher At Uzbek State World Languages University, Journalism Faculty
Tashkent Uzbekistan*

ABSTRACT

The presented work reflects some thoughts on the evolution of women’s role in American society in the XIX-XX centuries through the lens of literary works of prominent American she-writers. It is also proposed to study whether they are successful in transferring their senses, emotions, experiences and issues because they write about their same sex and are from women community.

KEYWORDS: *feminism; gender inequality; comparative study, character transformation, identity, freedom*

INTRODUCTION

To analyze feminine identity and the social status of women between at the turn of nineteenth century and twentieth century, I have compared several works. These works belong to different periods of the century and women step by step start to get their freedom on their personal choices, expressing their desires and emotions.

Furthermore this article examines how selected modern women writers treat feminism and female identity in their works and how women writers’ movement, their techniques and thematic works attempt to help modern world to understand women’s issues and feminine concepts.

It is well-known, the social status of women changed enormously in between XIX and XX centuries. In the XIX century a woman’s place was in the home, as domesticity and motherhood were considered as a standard by society. The women’s movement struggled to transform their social status from the domestic sphere to the public, to establish equality for women. Moreover, WWI and WWII gave opportunity to many American women to work, including teaching, nursing and telephone operations. The historical changes allowed women to become important figures of society and they could make contribution to the further progress of the society as men did. After World War II women began to challenge their roles in politics, economic spheres, developing more community organizations and services for women. As a result, society accepted

this type of “New woman” that females could be independent and choices for themselves in education, jobs, marital status and careers. Women’s spheres had broadened to include public as well as home life. All these social changes were transformed to the pages of feminist writings.

Feminism as a literary criticism explores mainly the following issues: how is the relationship between men and women portrayed; how are male and female roles defined; what constitutes masculinity and femininity; how do characters embody these traits; do characters take on traits from opposite genders; what does the work say about women’s creativity and others. I use these questions as a guideline for our further investigation.

Analyzing American fictions about women at the turn of the XIX-XX centuries we came to the conclusion that three novels became basement and influenced considerably on the further development of feminist writings. They are “The Yellow Wallpaper”(1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), “The Awakening” (1899) by Kate Chopin and “House of Mirth”(1902) by Edith Wharton (1862-1937). Typical themes common for the Era unite these novels. The female protagonists of these novels suffer from a **depression, loses all touch with reality**. This is depicted as the result of their complete dependence on their husband’s decisions, which imply that the protagonists are without any possibility of self-realization. Not being allowed to move freely or to engage in any kind of



activity, they stay locked up in their houses as in prison. Also, theme of **freedom** and **escape**, **personal identity**, **gender equality**, **hope** are present in the novels.

In 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) wrote *The Yellow Wall-paper*, based upon her own experience with 19th-century cures for depression among women. Forbidden by her husband/doctor to read or write, Gilman's unnamed narrator slowly but surely goes insane. Gilman does not want to give the name for her antagonist, because this story does not belong only one woman but also it involves all women of the society. Her horrifying journey is recounted through the journal she writes in secret. In the male-dominated universe of the Victorian age, having her own opinions and ideas was considered redundant for a married woman.[4; p.87] Being creative and using her imagination was inadmissible in marriage. At the end of "The Yellow Wallpaper", the protagonist, who is dedicated to writing, and who had been suffering from a slight depression, loses all touch with reality. This is depicted as the result of her complete dependence on her husband's decisions, which implies that the protagonist is without any possibility of self-realization. Due to her depression, the protagonist is forced to stay in a rented house for an entire summer. Not being allowed to move freely or to engage in any kind of activity, the stay is similar to being locked up in prison or an asylum. According to the medical beliefs of the time, total restriction from any kind of intellectual or physical work served the purpose of recovery from a woman's depression best. The nameless protagonist is repeatedly told by her husband to stop using her imagination and not to "give way to such fancies" [5; p. 79]. Not being able to write or share her thoughts openly with her husband increasingly isolates the protagonist and contributes to her mental health getting worse. However, the husband fails to recognize the severity of his wife's condition.

Although, almost 70 years passed since the publication of "The Yellow Wallpaper" but the same problem of search for personal identity in turbulent epoch is common for the novel of Sylvia Plath that belongs the mid of XX century. "The Bell Jar" first published in January 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas and later released posthumously under her real name. The work, a thinly veiled autobiography, chronicles a young woman's mental breakdown and eventual recovery, while also exploring societal expectations of women in the 1950s. Plath committed suicide one month after the publication of *The Bell Jar*[6], her only novel. Identically, *The Bell Jar* details the life of Esther Greenwood, a college student who dreams of

becoming a poet. She is selected for a month-long summer internship as a guest editor of *Ladies' Day* magazine, but her time in New York City is unfulfilling as she struggles with issues of identity and societal norms. She meets two other interns who manifest contrasting views of femininity as well as Esther's own internal conflicts: the rebellious and sexual Doreen and the wholesome and virginal Betsy. During this time, Esther thinks about her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, and her anger when he admitted that he was not a virgin, claiming to have been seduced. She believes he is a hypocrite, having acted as if she was more sexually experienced. After being rejected for a writing class, Esther must spend the rest of her summer at home with her mother; Esther's father died when she was young. She struggles to write a novel and becomes increasingly despondent, making several half-hearted suicide attempts. She ultimately overdoses on sleeping pills but survives.

It is essential to recognize that both protagonists of the novels suffer from the same problems as depression, having mental breakdown, not being allowed to move freely or to engage in any kind of activity, in spite of living different periods of century. Unknown heroine and Esther are interested in writing, but her husband and doctor forbids engaging her favorite activity. If we speak about Esther, she is not married, but the society rejected to accept her as a writer, they consider women as a usage of objective desire. "The Yellow Wallpaper" has paved the way for later feminist literature and the continuation of the feminist movement by drawing the story to an end in an almost optimistic way. As is obvious from the last scene of the story, the female narrator has changed her position from staying dormant in her bed to the position of crawling and creeping all around the room, even now she is able to surpass her biggest obstacle, that is, her tyrannical patriarchal husband. It can be implied that feminism has now moved on from its infancy and has begun a long, yet promising way. The female narrator of the story has now the strength and determination to go for seeming madness and insanity over living a sad life of muffled acceptance. She is for the very first time in her entire life, free from all the shackles and chains of patriarchal society and has liberated from whatever masculine concept that this society has previously inculcated in her mind. Insanity in this final scene, can thus be seen in positive lights. It can be rendered as positive if one views this final deed of the female narrator as a liberating act of selfhood and assertiveness.

To conclude, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is more of a feminist political declaration of independence for women than a work of fiction;



Moreover, it tries to save women from the gradual process toward madness and helps them escape the suffering from the cruel oppression of patriarchy which strangle whomever who does not abide by its tyrannical doctrine. It has successfully condemned the wrong notions about women and has shown a way out of the baffling labyrinth of domineering masculinity.

The next novel that is written in the same decade and devoted to women in struggling to reach freedom in private life, is **The House of Mirth**[7,59]. It criticized the upper class society of New York in the early 1900s,

a patriarchal society where women were subordinated and discouraged from achieving anything beyond a proper marriage. Wharton and her character Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* challenged the upper class society of New York by breaking social rules of conduct. In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton explored gender roles and criticized society's expectations of women through the voice of Lily.

Looking at the background in the upper class social circles of New York in the beginning of the previous century, there was an economic, social, and psychological oppression of women. Living in a world of rules of conduct, Lily Bart, the protagonist of the novel, felt suffocated and unable to escape. In a context where women married for money and social position, she too had to marry a wealthy man to keep her position in society and support her expensive habits. Lily was, however, unwilling to marry without love and money, which meant she was still on the marriage market at the age of 29. In this perspective, she exemplified a woman who tried to rebel and resist the constrictions of patriarchal culture. At the same time, Lily became a victim of this society, "emblematic of its essential cruelty and contradictions[8; p.3], since, unable to fulfil its expectations of women, she was ultimately led to a tragic death.

This paragraph is investigated to show how Wharton, through Lily, criticized society, and more specifically its expectations of women. Therefore, the main purpose here is to reveal the complexity of the lives women led in order to fulfil society's expectations and to explore what it was like living in a world governed by strict rules of conduct. Moreover Wharton stressed the complex life Lily had to live in order to keep her upper class position. She showed how her protagonist was torn between her vocation to marry for money and achieving a life free from obligations – instead of having to marry for social status, Lily wanted to marry for love. Wharton problematized how women were expected to follow strict social rules of conduct by showing that as soon

as Lily was rejected by society due to her reluctance to fully accept its expectations of her she was left with nowhere to go. She could not survive a life outside society either, because she was not educated or trained to live a life on her own. Thus, with no other options lying ahead and no space for her in this world, Lily is led to her tragic death[9].

In the meantime, we are in a position to realize how far ahead of her times Chopin was in her attitudes. The novel *The Awakening* (1899)[10] was her major work, in which she renders the spiritual and erotic awakening of a married woman from the numbness of matrimony and social conventions. Her heroine, Edna Pontellier, falls in love with a young man, leaves her husband and children and tries to live on her own in New Orleans. But when her beloved deserts her she succumbs to despair and commits suicide. Because society restricted women's choices so harshly, they often developed an excessive dependence on men and romantic love and might become enormously vulnerable emotionally. Edna tries to establish an independent existence, but finds herself isolated in the community and receives no real support for this project. She rebels against the role as mother and housekeeper that the husband and society demand that she fulfil and insists on satisfying her own desires and wishes. In short, she demands independence, equality, and freedom in an age with few possibilities of this kind. Divorce was difficult to obtain, and the job market was not regarded as the natural domain of women. Edna paints, but women were not really supposed to be painters either. Her friend, the pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, is a recluse and an eccentric, which suggests to Edna that women have to pay a high price if they insist on being artists of any kind, or even individuals. The consequence of all this is that Edna is left with the fatal conviction that there is no room for a woman like herself in the world. Ultimately, she becomes a victim of the sex role expectations of her place and time.

At the turn of the XX-XXI centuries one more representative of American female writers in twentieth century is Elizabeth Gilbert who portrays image of women through her famous book "Eat, Pray, Love". The words eat, pray, love for women might be prohibited pleasures of femininity: hedonism, devotion, sensuality. Gilbert's writing propounds a comic cult of female personality, a kind of literary incarnation of the "best friend". Events of this book is described the experience of E. Gilbert and the main hero of this work is herself. The main hero was a high-achieving, wealthy "career girl" in her early 30 years, living in a luxury house with her husband, she has everything friends, picnics, spends her days with parties, but in reality she was unhappy, because she does not love her husband, she feels obliged to have a baby but does not really want one.



Women's lives have changed in permanent and profound ways over the past decades. Through the women's liberation movement that changed people's idea about the role of women in society and made a lot of improvement politically, socially and educationally, allowing them to have a high place in society. The women of twentieth century and their actions, the movements, the aspiration of being independently all of these are caused the rise of gender equality. Nonetheless, woman had to work hard and fight for their right to be considered equal, independent.

Eat, Pray, Love is written in the first person and brings a mixture of elements that draw the attention of the reader such as: a woman who is unhappy in her marriage, then gets devastated by a bitter divorce, and then decides to travel to places that are usually shown as heavenly spots where people go on vacation to enjoy life pleurably, and where she has the means to find (or at least to try to find) answers to her innermost questions.

In general, the novel is set in four distinct areas: New York, Italy, India, Indonesia. The main characters moves from place to place to understand who is she, and what is the true aim of her life. She tries to reconcile her mind, body, soul and heart. Even in the 21 century, in the country like the USA, where the rights of woman are at high respect, the reader may observe, that the society expects from women the performance of standard and traditional roles, that are being good wife and mother. Liz goes against these rules cause she feels like living the life of "the other".

So, Elizabeth Gilbert's "Eat, Pray, Love" as a travel memoir that brings the journey as a vehicle for the protagonist to find answers in her self-imposed exile. In the narrative, we follow a part of Gilbert's life; a young woman who leaves New York after her divorce and a failed relationship with another man and who goes to Italy, India and Indonesia in order to "search for everything" that she believes to be important for her [11]. Gilbert's narrative follows a chronological order and for the reader it is easy to notice how the transitions and changes of her identity happen during the trip. The narrator associates each place to steps of her search and accomplishments. Italy is the place chosen for the first step towards the healing of Gilbert's body. Gilbert mentions in the narrative she struggled with depression and anxiety due to her unfriendly divorce. **These things had an impact over her health and, in Italy, she had the opportunity to recover her strength by eating well and nurturing her body but more importantly, by surrendering to pleasure**

without feeling guilty. It is in Italy where Gilbert takes the self-indulgence very seriously because, in my point of view, it is a crucial moment for the narrator to scrutinize her feelings and admit the final cycle of some things in her life. It is her "ground zero", the beginning of a very important stage of her life [12;p. 159]. As the title of the book suggests, "to eat" as one of the most important human activities associated to pleasure gives room to a full, physically strong and happier woman. There is ambivalence in Gilbert's journey because besides the trip giving her the knowledge about herself and allowing her to restore her identity, the journey demands from her a large amount of strength and energy, especially mentally and emotionally.

Then, the healed body needs a healed mind, and the next part of her journey provides Gilbert with Indian spiritual practices, which are important for her to find the balance between body and soul. According to the title of the book, by praying, meditating, controlling her negative and selfish thoughts, she would reach God and the divine. Moreover, Gilbert has the opportunity to develop patience, resilience and she becomes less self-centered by understanding that the chaos was necessary for her transformation. Finally, the last part of the trip was in Indonesia, where she seeks the balance in her life, which is represented by the narrator making peace with her past, accepting that she needed to go through that process to evolve as a person. And, more importantly, we believe that Gilbert learns to recognize love. The "pursuit of balance" is a result of body, mind and heart united; it is a sort of search which is really appealing to many readers, and as Melissa Whitworth affirmed in [13; p. 34].

Hence, passing through the long journey around the world "eating, praying and loving she comes to herself and finds her own identity. By the end of the novel the main character is transformed into a decisive, strong, morally and spiritually reconciled woman. Moreover, she finds faith, confidence, her inner essence and establishes spiritual relationship with an entity or higher power greater than herself.

It is essential to recognize that all heroines of the novels have to choose to accept the norms of masculine society or to reach self indulgence. In this case they find some means which help solving their problem, as suicide or something close to it, insanity became "solution" for oppressed women. . It was apparently typical that death might become the only way out for women who tried to live according to their own premises during this era. Heroines try to obtain respect and acceptance of their own personalities and wishes and discover that this is not possible in the



world that they live in. Obviously, in the last novel we can observe the high progress, development in the society. Travel serves as a means of searching identity, keeping balance among body, soul and heart. The trip provides author with the opportunity

to rebuild her identity, to control negative, selfish thoughts.

Similarities and Differences of the novels

“The Yellow paper”	“The Awakening”	“The house of Mirth”	“The Bell Jar”	“Eat, pray , Love”
XIX-XX century			XX	XXI
No name	Edna	Lily	Esther	Elizabeth
S: Title is symbolic				
The imprisonment of women or a trapped woman much as the narrator is a prisoner in her own home.	Pshycological and physiological awakening	Wise people think about death, loss, while foolish people are busy thinking of happy and silly things	Isolation, limitation and social pressure	Eats in Italy, prays and meditates in India and learns to love in Bali, Indonesia.
Autobiographical features				
The author herself had been utterly sick and depressed throughout her entire pregnancy.	Chopin lived and wrote about what it means for individuals to escape, at least psychologically, from socially prescribed positions in life.		Several events in the novel parallel those of the life of its writer.	While writing this book author based on her worldview and lived reality, she adventured on an excursion.
Character				
Depressive, alone, submissive	Submissive, alone, inattentive, self-unconsciousness	Alone, irresponsible, Gambler, dependence on high society	Hopelessness, sense of disaffection, depressive	She is rich, a successful writer, she has family and friends, perfect modern dream life with husband but she finds herself Stuck in an unhappy marriage, struggling with acute depression
Transformation of character				
Gilman transforms the narrator from being limited by John’s (husband) prescriptions, toward being free and able to do what she please.	The main character is transformed into strong, decisive, she discovers her own identity independent of her husband and children. She awakens her desires, urges for music, sexual satisfaction and freedom	The main character is transformed from a material girl to a pillar of morality.	Esther is terribly unhappy with her life and she feels that the community is grooming her for a docile life in future	The main character is transformed into a decisive, strong, morally and spiritually reconciled woman. She finds faith, confidence, her inner essence.
Plot				



Begins with the conversation between the main protagonist and husband and ends up with illness.	Begins with the description of Grand Isle where the place is rented in summer and ends up with death.	Begins with the conversation of Lawrence Selden and the main character and ends up with death	Begins with the main protagonist questioning of herself that something wrong in her life and at the end of the novel she slowly recovers from her suicide attempt: her hope is simply to survive	Begins with the description of places and ends up being free from the social constraints.
B Setting				
House-rented house – hospital	House, ocean, beach, rented house	House, a country estate	House, hospital, college	House, Rome, India, Bali
Themes and problems				
The subordination of women in marriage	Solitude as the consequence of independence	The safety of love and death	The emptiness of conventional expectations	Searching pleasure
The importance of self-expression	The implication of self – expression	Money versus morality	The restricted role of women in 1950s America	A space of her own

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