

Feminism issues in the yellow wallpaper and purple hibiscus novels



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Throughout many works of literature one can find overlying themes that carry throughout multiple texts. Along with this an expanse of literary techniques are used commonly among credible works of literature. While novels, novellas, or short stories may have a different overall message or storyline they may share a common ideas such as, feminism, Marxism or post-modernism. An example of this occurrence is shown throughout the paralleled ideas of feminism in the short story, " The Yellow Wallpaper", by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and " Purple Hibiscus", by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Both stories share cultural themes of feminism and overcome the issue of being treated as inferior to men in their society.

Forever in our society, women have been both underestimated and treated as if they are fragile or weak. This is the case for the female characters in the story Purple Hibiscus, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Unlike Adichie's real life morals, the protagonist Kambili was accustomed to the seemingly patriarchal society that exists throughout Nigeria, due to the actions of her grotesquely conservative father. Similarly to Kamibili's position under her father's superiority complex, Beatrice, Kambili's mother, also deals with the struggle of living under the wrath of her husband. For years and years, Beatrice has dealt with Eugene and his abuse, not only emotionally, but also physically and sexually. Whether it be through her " necessary beatings" in repentance for her " sins" or when Eugene beats the life out of Beatrice's growing fetus, rather than going through the embarrassment of having an abortion Eugene has complete control over her life. As a man of fortune and power, Eugene feels as if it is his place to determine his wife's right and

wrongdoing and thus create his own form of punishment, often times being abuse.

Interestingly enough the author herself identifies herself as a feminist, making the weakness of Beatrice, in the beginning of the story, a contradictory character to the author herself. Coming from a woman, when giving a speech about how to create gender equality, who once said,

And this is how to start. We must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently. We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity becomes this hard small cage and we put boys inside the cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. (Adichie) it is difficult to understand how she could write a story focused on how the masculinity of a powerful man has such an extreme grasp on the life of his wife and daughter. However, Adichie writes a tale of the feminine hardship women face in Nigeria because it is what she knows and understands to be accurate to the lifestyle of a Nigerian woman. Through her experience of living through the shame and embarrassment it brings to a strong, intelligent, independent woman, living in an otherwise male ruled country, Adichie is able to reflect her own life events on the characters of Purple Hibiscus.

Throughout Purple Hibiscus, Adichie's use of cultural language and gender roles within a society are used to show the rise of feminism throughout characters such as Kambili and Beatrice. The reader observes the extensive use of culture-specific names and words within the story. These terms often

times focus on the prominence of male superiority throughout the Nigerian culture. The formal way in which the community members as well as his wife and kids address Eugene show his dominance and is just one example of how males throughout this story are thought to deserve more respect than women. Another example of the display of Eugene's superiority is the way in which his family acts around him. They are constantly walking on eggshells in fear that they will do something to displease their father or husband. One morning Kambili feels nauseous due to her cramps and her mother allows her to eat some cereal before they go to church. When Eugene discovers Kambili's actions, he is appalled that she would dare to eat within an hour before church as it is forbidden under his strong religious beliefs. Not only does he wait to make them go to church until later, but he also doles out beatings to both his wife and children as they all allowed the act and therefore needed to pay for their sins. All of these actions are examples of the cultural norms set by men in Nigeria and demonstrate the sense of ascendancy Eugene has over the women in his life. Another way in which the cultural barriers are demonstrated and then broken down by women throughout the story are reflected upon in the quote,

The linguistic acumen displayed by the author here looks into how women are under-estimated, downgraded, second-classed, and rather looked down upon by their male counterparts and how women are rising to the occasion to take on a man's challenge on this. To this end, Adichie exemplifies this on a number of occasions throughout *Purple Hibiscus*. (Lawal)

This delves into the concept of how the female characters in this story

overcome the stigma of males in Nigeria having the upper hand and instead
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are able to create their own success and thus their own independence. This contributes to the theme feminism throughout the story.

Until the end of the novel the use of feminism, while still prominent, is only periodically demonstrated throughout the story by the female characters. Most often, it is Auntie Ifeoma who presents a feminist figure in the story. In her ability to sway and intimidate Eugene with her independence Auntie Ifeoma demonstrates her feminism. There is not a need for a man in Ifeoma's life in order for her to raise her children right and provide for them and herself. She has a job and a home, and albeit a small home and low paying job, she does everything she can for her family and inevitably makes it a warm and welcoming environment for her children. Auntie Ifeoma recognizes the lack of freedom Jaja and Kambili have under their father's guidance so she convinces Eugene to take the kids for a while to let him "have a break". Knowing full well their extremely conservative father is oppressing the children; she takes in Jaja and Kambili into her home to show them what life can be like when they are not constantly being controlled over. This is where Kambili begins to flourish and realize the wrongdoing of her father. Kambili sees what it is like to not have her thoughts and beliefs forced upon her and is able to open herself up to a much less conventional lifestyle. Her ability to let loose and see that the actions of her father were not right, demonstrate Kambili's overcoming of patriarchy through her growing feminism. The time when the kids are away is also when Beatrice sees a way in which to escape from the tight grasp of Eugene. Tired of his constant abuse and lack of respect, Beatrice decides to poison Eugene, killing him off. This act of desperation validates just how oppressive Eugene

was towards his family, especially Beatrice. This shows her strong willed sense of feminism and determination to rid her family's life of Eugene's wretched behavior.

The growth of Kambili and her ability to overcome the actions of her father help to prove her sense of strength. The same goes for Beatrice. A woman who once completely succumbed to the practices of the dominant male in her family was able to rise above and find the strength to overpower this source of masculinity and allow her feminist force prosper. The actions of the females characters in Purple Hibiscus were risky, but both Kambili and Beatrice dug deep inside themselves to find the power to rise above the patriarchy in their lives.

In the short Story, The Yellow Wall Paper, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, there is a use of period-specific gender role tendencies to demonstrate the female protagonist's journey to overcome male superiority through feminism. The main character, who remains nameless throughout the story, lives her life being constantly swayed by the wants and needs of her husband John. Because the story is set in the late 1900's the narrator is assumed to be a stay at home wife who caters to all her husbands, physical, sexual, and emotional needs as well as to tend to the all the children and housework. This however, is not the lifestyle that the narrator wants. A few months post birth and now dealing with her post-partum depression, the narrator feels detached from her life in general, especially her husband. This is often reflected in her lack of interaction with John both socially and sexually. The narrator is specifically told by her husband to not do anything, as he is a doctor and should be able to correctly diagnose her. The narrator is ordered <https://assignbuster.com/feminism-issues-in-the-yellow-wallpaper-and-purple-hibiscus-novels/>

by her husband to avoid any kind of strenuous activity or over-stimulation, as it will only exacerbate her condition. (Baldwin) This in and of itself is an example of John's brutal sense of superiority over his wife.

John treats her like a child, calling her diminutive names like "blessed little goose" and "little girl." He makes all decisions for her and isolates her from the things she cares about. His actions are couched in concern for her, a position that she initially seems to believe herself. (Sustana)

He feels that he has the right to interpret her actions and therefore force her respond the way he sees fit. For the narrator, this means no interaction with the outside world, being forbidden to write in any journals, and lastly, being confined to a single dull room, covered in yellow wallpaper.

The narrator's first act of feminism is displayed through her direct disobeying of her husband's demand that she not write at all. As the story itself is the written journal of the narrator, it is clear she disobeyed John's request, one because she finds writing as a therapy for her sadness, but also to purposely spite John. This demonstrates the narrator's clear disapproval of her husband's authority figure. Another significant example of the narrator's feminism throughout the story is her distance from John on its own. He is very sexual towards her and despite his forbidding of her having other social interactions, expects her to please him. The narrator evades this behavior by seemingly ignoring John and not acting upon his advances towards her. This action of hers discredits John's masculinity and gives the narrator a power over him. Towards the end of the story at which point the narrator's confinement to the room with the yellow wallpaper has caused her to go

insane, she demonstrates her feminism once again. John sees that the narrator has developed a serious infatuation with the intimate wallpaper and demands that she take it down. In a direct manner, the narrator completely ignores his request and remains in her delusional fairytale with the wallpaper, refusing to take it down. It is this blatant lack of respect for her husband's demands that makes the narrator such a revolutionary character for this time period.

Tyson introduces the idea of what she calls the patriarchal woman, "a woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy" (Tyson 85). One such patriarchal norm is that "men [are] naturally superior to women: for example, more intelligent, more logical" (Tyson 86). In "The Yellow Wallpaper" there are several instances where it is evident that the narrator is one such patriarchal woman. The narrator has her own opinions about what is wrong with her and what she believes to be the best ways to improve her conditions. (Baldwin)

In her generation, most women would completely obey their husbands because they associated themselves as less important or less intelligent than men and therefore feared showing any sense of superiority. The protagonist of The yellow Wallpaper however breaks this mold and emerges as a radical feminist.

Through both of these stories, one of modern female struggle and one of old fashion male superiority, it is evident that the female protagonists rise above through feminism. In Purple Hibiscus, both Kambili and her Beatrice are able to overcome a lifetime of oppression by their traditional father and husband

and emerge as strong, independent females. As for the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she demonstrates her ability to rise above the patriarchy of her husband in the 1800's and prove herself a radical literary feminist. In each text the cultural and period-specific situations of the woman help aid the evidence of their feminism as they separate themselves from the stereotype of having to be submissive under their male counterparts, thus both proving to be empowering and revolutionary texts.