

“Fighting against the Repressed- Insanity or Death?”: Comparing Tagore’s Haimanti and Gilman’s Unnamed Narrator

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Abstract

According to Psychoanalytic Theory, Sigmund Freud’s concept of “repression” refers to the unpleasant or unacceptable emotions that one consciously pushes aside from the conscious mind in order to escape from shame, guilt, and anxiety. These emotions remain unconscious and may return in negative forms, such as psychological disorders, nightmares, and hallucinations, etc. This article investigates two female protagonists of Rabindranath Tagore and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Haimanti and the Unnamed Narrator, who faced serious consequences as a result of keeping their negative emotions and experiences repressed: The eponymous protagonist Haimanti in “Haimanti” (1914) endured torturous humiliation by her in-laws for her uncompromising honesty and not being able to fulfill the promise of giving dowry, while The Narrator in Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), became a prisoner of the defective treatment named ‘rest cure’, where she lost all freedom under the complete domination of her loving but restrictive husband. Employing Sigmund Freud’s concept of “repression,” this article offers a critical comparison between the consequences of the two female protagonists, which unfolds in two ways: it underscores if and how “repression” played a role behind their negative consequences and how the same theme is represented differently across a range of time and the author’s point of view. This article contends that, in both cases, the protagonists, despite being strong and creative women or having relentless love and support from their male counterparts, stopped fighting for themselves and kept their negative experiences and emotions repressed. Consequentially, the repressed emotions returned in two hideous forms: Haimanti’s health deteriorated and she committed psychological femicide, and the Unnamed Narrator hallucinated, developed psychosis and completely lost sanity.

Keywords: Repressed, Freud, Psychosis, Tagore, Haimanti, Femicide

1. Introduction

Composed by Rabindranath Tagore, the literary magician of Bengal, and originally published in 1914 in the newspaper called ‘Sabuj Pattar’, the eponymous protagonist Haimanti in “Haimanti” was a highly educated girl of 16-17, who depicts a negative social scenario of twentieth-century India: the traditional Indian system of marriage and how dowry played an unjust role in the cruel treatment of women of which Haimanti was a victim. The humiliations and mistreatment that Haimanti faced because of her uncompromising honesty pushed her to silence when she kept her sufferings to herself and her emotions repressed. Even after having profound love and respect for her, her husband, Apu, was utterly helpless to save Haimanti from the disgrace she received from his family. On the other hand, first published in The New England Magazine, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a famous short story by American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which was first published in 1892.

The protagonist in Gilman's story was also an educated and highly imaginative woman who, as a result of a lack of autonomy, dived into insanity when her mind and emotions were constantly in conflict against each other. Controlled and tied by her husband's excessively restrictive nature, the protagonist lost all freedom and agency and kept her desires and needs repressed in her mind. Following Sigmund Freud's concept of "repression," that unpleasant emotions that are kept repressed "could resurface in disturbing forms" (*Repression*), this study will first attempt to determine if the "repressed" emotions of the two female protagonists' gave rise to their painful consequences. Then, it will carry out a comparative reading between their circumstances and consequences to observe if and how the repressed emotions culminated in "disturbing forms." Employing Freud's concept of "repression", this study also underscores what circumstances led to "repression" or, how "repression" took place in their lives. Finally, it will investigate how Gilman resembles or varies from Tagore, in the representation or portrayal of the consequences of the central female characters and how the same theme is represented differently across a range of time and the author's point of view. This comparison can be of use to achieve a better comprehension of the outcome or result of "repression" and offer more insight into the field of Psychoanalytic Criticism. The implications, however, deserve to be studied and analysed further. The translations in the present article have been done by the author.

2. Burying the Unpleasant

In Psychoanalytic Theory, repression is a dynamic idea. The concept of repression is the foundation and at the heart of Psychoanalytic theory ((Slavin, 1990, p. 308). The term "repressed" (*verdrängt*) appears for the first time in Breuer and Freud's *Preliminary Communication* (1893) in Breuer & Freud, 1895. Repression is a "fending off" preventing "incompatible ideas" that arouse unpleasure (such as shame, self-reproach or psychical pain) from association with conscious thinking (Freud, in Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 157). Freud stated that "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious (Freud, 1915, p. 147). The definition used by the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Working group on Reported Recovered Memories of Child Sexual Abuse (Brandon, Boakes, Glaser & Green 298), defines repression, "A Freudian concept, repression is said to occur when a memory is actively kept out of consciousness because it is unacceptable to the conscious mind, to which its admission would generate anxiety" (p. 298). According to Freud, what has been repressed, tends to find outlets for discharge and all mental processes are processes in which some energy is accumulated, stored, blocked and discharged. (*Repression: Concept, kinds and advantages: Psychology* 2016).

3. The Narrator's Gradual Spiraling into Psychosis

As narrated by herself in her secret journal, the Unnamed Narrator in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* "The Yellow Wallpaper" is seen to develop psychosis at the end of her "rest cure." During this "rest cure," being denied any "society or stimulus" (Gilman, 2021, p. 1), she was isolated from the rest of the world and forced into inaction as a solution to her "post-partum depression" following the birth of her child. Her husband, John, who was a doctor, restricted her from all activities, indoors or outdoors. She was denied any autonomy. All her actions were strictly controlled by John. He dismisses all her interests for the sake of the "complete rest" that her treatment prescribes. The narrator is sometimes seen to be disheartened by the restrictive nature of John, but eventually represses her interests and desires, succumbing to his dominating nature. In this regard, Freud establishes that "it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget and therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed" (Breuer & Freud, 1895, p. 10). During her isolation at the mansion, she is even deprived of being with her child, who is taken care of by a nurse. Even after getting all the care and love that John offers, she feels suffocated in the "delicious" (Gilman 2) mansion. Her bitter emotions about not being able to live freely without the domination of John make her unhappy. Gradually, she becomes obsessed with the yellow wallpaper in the room she was forced to stay in, calling it "debased Romanesque with *delirium tremens*" (Gilman, 2021, p. 3), and finally imagines to believe that there was a woman "stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" that "slapped" her in the face, "knocked" her down, and "trampled" upon her "like a bad dream." In this aspect, Freud believed that the "repressed material, though unconscious, was still present and could resurface in disturbing forms. As well as a lack of insight and understanding, the inability to process and come to terms with repressed material could lead to psychological problems" (*Repression*). In this light, her seeing of a woman trapped inside the yellow wallpaper is nothing but a hallucination. Her repressed disappointments began to resurface, causing mental instability in her. This was a hallucinatory creation of her own trapped self. About the formation of hallucinations, Freud said that these repressed negative emotions of a person remain unconscious in the mind, but they may come or resurface in "the form of substitutive *phantasies* (Freud, 1907, p. 58). In the end of her own secret diary, she completely lost sanity by losing touch with reality and started to secretly crawl on the floor like the imaginary woman on the wallpaper, seeing which John fell on the floor, unconscious. Her fixation on the woman in the wallpaper and crawling on the floor like her in the end actually revealed her own entrapped situation, which she had been suppressing in her mind all this time.

This deterioration of the protagonist's mental health did not happen overnight. Certain repressed emotions and feelings had led her to the final breakdown. In this aspect, the over-controlling nature of John had been a constant catalyst, as she wrote about John, "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman, 2021, p. 2). It is evident that John directed her life singlehandedly, and in return, she became absolutely dependent on him. He dismissed all her needs and desires and continued to make all the decisions in her life. Again, throughout her whole narration in the secret diary, she

never mentioned her name. She is called by different nicknames by John, such as little goose, poor thing, etc. Although she mentions in multiple places that she felt sick, John denies her feelings and says that there was no reason to suffer and that it was just her “slight hysterical tendency” and “temporary nervous depression.” As soon as she starts staying at the magnificent mansion, she feels the place to be strange. The room with the yellow wallpaper constantly irritated her, as she wrote, “The color is hideous enough, unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing” (Gilman, 2021, p. 8). At one point, she became hallucinatory about the wallpaper; as she wrote, “it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern” (Gilman, 2021, p. 7). She requested John again and again to change her room. But, as usual, John lovingly rejected her request.

The narrator has a creative mind, and during the “rest cure,” she mentions that she wishes to write to feel good. But John dismisses her wish to write. She painfully shares, “I did write for a while in spite of them, but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman, 2021, p. 1). So, she had to secretly express her thoughts. Her writing secretly shows her creativity to find an outlet that could relieve her mind. Freud stated that the repressed emotions always try to find an outlet to express themselves through any type of “substitute (secondary) satisfaction” (Freud, 1910b, p. 148). John deprived her of all sorts of activities, mental or physical. Clearly, she seemed to have no outlet for expressing her thoughts and feelings, and so they remained repressed in her mind. Little did she know that her repressed emotions would come out as “hideous” as the yellow wallpaper. She eagerly waited for some independence but received none. She craved “society and stimulus” instead of isolation and inaction. She believed “congenial work, with excitement and change,” would improve her condition. That would have been possible if she had received “less opposition” from John.

Gradually, she became so restricted by her husband that she started to feel herself a burden on John, as she says, “Here I am; here I am a comparative burden already!” (Gilman, 2021, p. 3). At the “rest cure,” she is also denied access to her child, who is taken care of by a nurse. The controlling and dismissive nature of John and their isolation completely paralyzed her mind instead of healing her. If one looks closely at her life at the mansion, he would very easily be able to understand the cause of her becoming insane in the end. She agrees to everything that John restricts her from, but secretly represses her pain of not being able to exert her voice. When she says, “I cry at nothing and cry most of the time” (Gilman 18), the reader is not left to understand that it is the isolation she is in that is causing her all the pain. It was her repressed emotions that were actually bringing tears to her eyes. It is painful that she secretly writes about her desires and needs: “If I had less opposition and more society and stimulus” (Gilman, 2021, p. 1). She clearly understands that the inactivity and isolation in the “rest cure” are actually worsening her mental state than healing her, but John never cares about her needs. Thus, her repressed emotions are buried in her mind because she knows that John would never allow her to take charge of her own life. All these repressed emotions result in her hallucinatory behaviors about the yellow wallpaper. She hallucinates that there is a woman behind the “bars” on the wallpaper. But in reality, it was her repressed emotions that were reflected on the hideous wallpaper. The woman who was entrapped was actually herself, trying to free herself from the bars. Here, the “bars” certainly symbolize John’s restrictive and dismissive nature that has kept her life in prison. She is forced into psychosis day by day when, ultimately, she collapses, losing touch with reality. In this case, her repressed feelings or thoughts have returned in the form of disturbing forms, i.e., hallucinations. As Freud (1896) says about the return of these repressed emotions, “there is a period of apparent health (successful defense), until finally the illness proper is “characterized by *the return of the repressed memories*—that is, therefore, by the failure of defense” (p. 169). The repressed emotions have come up in disturbing forms until she no longer can keep up the “defense,” i.e., repressed emotions. She lost her battle completely and spiraled into psychosis.

4. Haimanti’s Self-Isolation into Solitary Silence

Haimanti is an immortal creation of Tagore that remains cherished in the hearts of Bengalees and people worldwide. Haimanti, a seventeen-year-old educated girl, is the epitome of sacrifice at the hands of the cruel patriarchal system of matrimony in twentieth-century India. A symbol of femicide, Haimanti was forced into isolation and domination by her in-laws for her uncompromising honesty and truth and for not being able to give dowry. Her husband, Apu, was a loving and caring husband but helpless to save her from the humiliations of his own family. The consequence of Haimanti’s silence was her death as a result of being unable to protest against her in-laws. However, this consequence did not occur overnight. Days and weeks of repressed emotions led her to finally collapse. At the beginning of their marriage, Apu described Haimanti as a very spontaneous girl. But as the story progressed, Haimanti had to undergo cruel humiliations at her in-laws for being able to give dowry, for which she gradually became isolated and reserved. Apu mentions that Haimanti’s temperament had also changed and he was often seen to sit “in silence.” Apu mentioned that she was seen having “voiceless conversation with the silent sky” (Tagore, 1881, p. 655).

Haimanti’s health began to deteriorate, too. Haimanti is truly a depiction of how repressed emotions can totally damage a person, both mentally and physically. The incidents that forced her to keep her emotions and feelings repressed were many. Haimanti could not lie about her age since she was brought up in an honest and simple environment by her father, as her mother died in her childhood. Her mother-in-law forced her to lie about her age. When Haimanti protested that she could not lie, she was humiliated even more. As a result, she was forced to surrender to her in-laws. Her mother-in-law taught Haimanti to say and act whatever and however she told her to. The spontaneous and honest Haimanti could not endure this duplicity and gradually isolated herself to a corner in the house and became silent. As her loving husband Apu wrote, “Ever since the day they started criticizing and humiliating Haimanti, she has been enduring it all in silence. She did not shed a single tear in front

of anyone” (Tagore, 1881, p. 653). The humiliations crossed the limit when she could not pay them the dowry that they were desperate for. Haimanti became totally isolated, and thus her health deteriorated. Apu noticed that her health was also deteriorating day by day. She was getting thinner.

Repression of her emotions and experiences began in all spheres of her life. The humiliations she endured were shared by no one. Apu loved her immensely, but Haimanti never shared with him the tortures she endured. Apu came to know about her condition from his sister, Narani. Apu wrote with great helplessness, “I never heard about them from Haimanti” (Tagore, 1881, p. 654). Perhaps Haimanti knew about Apu’s helplessness in not being able to save her from his own family. In this regard, Apu wrote, “Haimanti was dying in silence every moment. I could give her the world, but I cannot give her freedom” (Tagore, 1881, p. 655). As her health deteriorated, a doctor was being called, who prescribed, “Change of air is a must. Otherwise, she may catch a deadly disease soon” (Tagore, 1881, p. 656). Unfortunately, she was denied any movement from the house. Apu fought with his family but failed. She kept all her failures and sufferings repressed, and she seemed not to be able to carry her repressed burdens anymore. At the end of the story, Apu mentions, unclearly, that Haimanti was no longer there in their house, probably not in the world either.

5. Comparing Haimanti with The Unnamed Narrator

Rabindranath Tagore and Charlotte Perkins Gilman are two famous writers whose undying female protagonists are Haimanti and The Unnamed Narrator, representing the critical social scenario of matrimony in twentieth-century India and America, respectively. The two protagonists face unjust treatment that forces them to commit psychological femicide and delve into insanity. It is their choice of repression that lies behind their painful consequences, apart from the suffering they endure. As Freud claimed, “repressed material, though unconscious, was still present and could resurface in disturbing forms (*Repression*), it has been seen that both protagonists stopped fighting for themselves and resorted to expressing themselves either through keeping secret journals or isolating completely from the surrounding environment. In both cases, the protagonists conformed to the restrictive conditions that they were forced into. Without any form of protest, they succumbed to the suffering they had undergone. At one point, they repressed their negative emotions and experiences so much that they could no longer escape the burden of them. This culminated in two disturbing and hideous forms: Haimanti became totally isolated and committed femicide at the end of the story, while The Unnamed Narrator lost touch with reality and developed psychosis.

Both Haimanti and The Unnamed Narrator had loving and caring husbands. Haimanti received endless love and respect from Apu. However, in spite of having love and support for her, he could never save her from the humiliations and disgrace that his family had imposed upon her. Most importantly, Haimanti never discussed or expressed to Apu how much he suffered at the in-laws. Apu pointed out, “I never heard about them from Haimanti” (Tagore, 1881, p. 655). It was his younger sister, Narani, from whom Apu came to know about the chaos Haimanti went through. Hence, it is evident that Haimanti kept all her pain and suffering to herself and was sometimes seen to have “voiceless conversation with the silent sky.” Thus, her negative experiences and emotions were not shared by anyone. Similarly, The Unnamed Narrator, too, even after being an educated woman like Haimanti, did not protest or express her strong desire against the unpleasant experiences she was going through. She craved social interactions and freedom but was forced to stay prisoner in a small room. Although she had an outlet for her repressed emotions, i.e., her secret journal, she never verbally protested for herself. She mentioned in multiple places that her husband John was too controlling: “He is very careful and loving and hardly lets me stir without special direction” (Gilman, 1881, p. 2). She wished to stop writing at one point because she had to be “so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman, 2021, p. 1). Without expressing her sufferings and protesting for herself, she began to feel herself a burden, as she wrote, “Here I am, a comparative burden already! (Gilman, 1881, p. 3).

Studying the two protagonists, it has been observed so far that both put an end to their lives: Tagore’s spontaneous protagonist embraced eternity by repressing her grief and woes to herself, while Gilman’s The Unnamed Narrator put an end to her usual life and delved into total psychosis. None of their husbands could save them from their consequences, even after sharing endless love and support. In both short stories, the protagonists met failure. It is evident that, as Freud claimed, both of their repressed emotions resulted in disturbing forms or psychological disorders: the Unnamed Narrator hallucinated and lost sanity, while Haimanti lost her life completely.

6. Reading and Writings as an Outlet of the Repressed

According to Freud, what has been repressed tends to find outlets for discharge (*Repression: Concept, kinds and advantages: Psychology* 2016). The two protagonists had certain hobbies that they were fond of. Both of them were educated and highly creative characters of the era. Gilman’s protagonist, the Unnamed Narrator, had a hobby and passion for writing. She, as a narrator and spokesperson for Gilman, mentioned in the story that the story was a “secret journal.” During her “rest cure” at the mansion, the secret journal was her only outlet for expressing her repressed experiences. Because she mentioned that John hated her for having her write a word (Gilman, 2021, p. 3). In real life, she could not fight for herself. It was her writing through which she released all her repressed feelings and desires. John controlled her in all aspects, and she wrote, “I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little, it would relieve the pressure of ideas and rest me” (Gilman, 2021, p. 4). She let the readers know that this outlet that she had was disliked by John: “I did write for a while in spite of them, but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition” (Gilman, 2021, p. 1). On the other hand,

Haimanti was a girl of seventeen who was educated and creative. She had a passion for reading. At the time of her marriage, her father said to Apu, "My daughter has a hobby of reading" (Tagore, 1881, p. 650). She obtained immense pleasure from reading English poetry. Sadly, after undergoing so much humiliation and disappointment, Haimanti gave up her hobby and turned away from all activities. Reading could be her only outlet for getting relief from her torturous, repressed emotions. But she took refuge in isolation and silence and rejected relief. Apu wrote that he had brought her a book of English poetry to make her feel happy, but "she took the book in her hands and slowly put it down on her lap. I didn't open it for once" (Tagore, 1881, p. 653). She lost all the interest that she once had. Thus, repressed emotions started to damage her from the inside.

7 Rest Cure and *Bayu Paribartan* (Change of air) as Ailment

In both short stories, little to no importance is given to the female protagonists' individual needs, desires, or mental health. In Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," although "rest cure" had been specially designed for the narrator's post-partum depression, she was forced into total inactivity and isolation against her consent. She hated this isolation and craved "society and stimulus." But nobody was there to grant her wish. She was isolated from her child, her family, and her house. She was moved to a faraway mansion, where she was forced into inaction by her husband, who was her doctor, too. The purpose of this treatment was to heal her mentally and physically by providing total rest. But the opposite consequence took place in her case. She began to feel like a burden and kept all her desires repressed in her mind. This gave way to further psychological disorders like hallucinations and psychosis; she started to crawl on the floor, looking for a way out of that prison. On the contrary, Tagore's eponymous protagonist was prescribed "change of air" by a doctor. Haimanti was a true reflection of how repressed emotions could damage a person's inside and out completely. Tortured by the humiliations of her in-laws for not being able to give her dowry, she isolated herself and kept all her hideous experiences repressed. This resulted in the gradual deterioration of her health. In spite of having a loving husband like Apu, nothing could save her from her painful, repressed emotions. She was suspected of contracting a "deadly disease" if she was not moved to a new environment temporarily. Unfortunately, unlike the narrator, she was not offered any change of environment.

8. Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the true magicians of literature as they were, created their famous female protagonists, Haimanti and Unnamed Narrator, full of mystery and insight. These unique protagonists of literature were crafted in such a way that they add depth to their usual characters, for which the readers not only indulge in the stories but also want to explore deep into their minds. Carrying out a critical comparison between the two short stories, the article demonstrated and contends that Freud's concept of "repression" coincides with the reason behind their painful consequences: Haimanti embraced psychological femicide, and The Unnamed Narrator hallucinated and dove into complete psychosis. Because they kept their unpleasant emotions and experiences repressed, both faced negative consequences. Gilman's protagonist became mentally disturbed, started hallucinating, crawled on the floor and lost touch with reality. Her hallucinating of a trapped woman inside the yellow wallpaper was nothing else but a reflection of her own entrapped situation, trying to come out of the imprisonment of her repressed emotions. Similarly, Haimanti withdrew herself from her surroundings, delved into complete silence, succumbed to all humiliation and ultimately embraced death, as her health was also damaged in the process. This study observes that, Sigmund Freud's concept of "repression" has served the purpose of understanding the reason behind the protagonists' agonising consequences. Although both Haimanti and Unnamed Narrator received immense love and continuous support from their male counterparts, they could not save their wives from the painful return of their repressed emotions. Be it continuous love and support of husband or humiliation from in-laws, both resulted in their keeping unpleasant emotions repressed. These unpleasant and torturous emotions came back in the form of mental disorders, hallucinations, ill health and even death. No consolatory form of relief or outlet could minimise or stop the negative outcomes of their repressed emotions. As this study set out a detailed comparison between the two short stories, a better comprehension of "repression" has been obtained in the field of Psychoanalytic Criticism. However, further exploration is required to be undertaken in this field.

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