

Comparison of Two “Mad Women” in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Golden Cangue*

I Introduction

In the narrative literature of the era depicting women's lives, numerous “madwoman” figures came to the forefront. This specific group of women found themselves marginalized and ostracized by patriarchal discourse, purportedly representing “reason,” subjecting them to expulsion, isolation, and confinement. Nevertheless, the portrayal of “madwomen” by female writers served as a means of questioning and passing judgment on the world and patriarchal society.

While such figures rebelling against orthodoxy initially went unnoticed, the appearance of “*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*,” written by female critics Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), acted as a key unlocking the mystery of “mad women.” The connection between “female” and “madness” became an important aspect for female writers in constructing women figures.

In the short story “*The Yellow Wallpaper*” (Gilman, 1892), the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman intertwines personal experiences to narrate the story of a mentally ill woman confined to a room for “Rest cure” by her physician husband. The protagonist is sequestered in a room adorned with

yellow wallpaper, forbidden to read or write, with all her activities halted by her husband. This yellow-walled room becomes a tangible prison, completely isolating her from the outside world.

The depiction of “mad women” is not exclusive to Western writers. For example, “*The Diary of a Madman*,” published by Lu Xun in 1918, is a landmark work in the history of Chinese literature, not only due to its pioneering use of vernacular language but also for its significant role in shaping the “madman” image. The protagonist, a madman in the novel, provides a clear and insightful critique of China’s feudal system, boldly asserting that China’s history is essentially a history of cruel activities spanning more than four thousand years (Lu, Lyell and Netlibrary, 1990). Following Lu Xun’s groundbreaking work, subsequent generations of writers have explored and incorporated the theme of madness into their literary works. Since the 1980s, Chinese critics have shifted their attention to “mad women,” not only discussing “madness” but also addressing issues related to women and human beings. The representative work “*The Golden Cangue*” (Ailing, 1998) has been hailed as Eileen Chang’s most successful piece, leading to the emergence of numerous related expository writings in the country (Gu, 2018). The classic portrayal of the madwoman “Cao Qiqiao” in the story has remained a focal point of research for many years. The portrayal of Cao Qiqiao is multi-dimensional and evolving. Faced with the pressures of both life and emotion, her character undergoes a distortion,

resulting in the manifestation of pathologically-stubborn behavior. She not only disrupts her son's marriage, leading to the torment and death of her daughter-in-law, but also separates her daughter from her love. The author's portrayal of the character's psychology is thorough and meticulous, vividly depicting the hopeless struggles of a vulnerable woman in the pursuit of money, power, and love, fully showcasing the process of becoming a sacrifice in a male-dominated society.

The concept of "the Other" has a long history in Western philosophy and is frequently employed in postmodern Western literary criticism. It symbolizes various negative conditions such as marginality, subordination, inferiority, oppression, and exclusion (Johnston, 2013). Both "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" and "*The Golden Cangue*" reflect women's sufferings and misfortune in a male-dominated society. Females in such a society either surrender to paternity as "the Other" or become accessories to men or rebel bravely to find themselves and speak for themselves. However, such rebellion is often regarded as "madness," repugnant to society, especially by males.

This essay will analyze the figures of "mad women" in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" and "*The Golden Cangue*," comparing the similarities and differences between them to reveal females' status of aphasia under a paternal society.

II The Construction of "Mad Women"—Oppression and Defiance

Females distinguish themselves from males by exhibiting heightened tenderness and diminished selfishness. Guided by maternal instincts, women prominently display these qualities towards their infants, likely extending such attributes to their fellow beings (Adams, 1989). Males, often perceived as superior due to robust physiological conditions, economic dominance, and the so-called “supremacy of law,” relegate females to the position of “the other.” However, in both stories set in a robust paternal culture, the heroines appear to abandon tenderness, instead revealing manifestations of “madness” and “paranoia.”

Oppressed by paternal authority, females in Western countries and China alike confront “imprisonment” and “neglect,” often deprived of their rights to speak and unfairly labeled as “crazy” or “mad.” Simone De Beauvoir (1949) argues that historical events have placed women in a submissive position to men, who have assumed the role of the stronger. Thomas Aquinas even inaccurately characterized women as deficient men based on a flawed examination of anatomy (Catholicism, 2020). Consequently, women are marginalized into the role of “the other,” while men are simultaneously designated as both the affirmative and impartial terms for humanity (Colenutt, 2021). Within these traditional constraints, women’s “madness” is not inherent but rather a consequence of constructed paternal norms.

1. Shared Experiences: Deprivation of the Right to Speak

In “*The Yellow Wallpaper*,” the protagonist expresses a preference for a room “downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings!” However, her husband, John, denies this request. Simultaneously, she is forbidden to write, signifying the denial of her right to be heard both verbally and literally. In the eyes of others, including her elder brother, the protagonist is expected to obediently adhere to the rules formulated by her husband.

In “*The Golden Cangue*,” Cao Qiqiao is not overtly prohibited from speaking; nevertheless, her attempts to express herself are consistently met with indifference or rude interruptions, effectively silencing her voice. This situation can be attributed to her perceived inferior identity and the patriarchal rules that create an unwelcoming environment for women seeking to articulate their thoughts. For example, following the death of Cao’s mother-in-law, the family is obligated to undergo a separation into branch families according to tradition. Cao, as the representative of her family, is entrusted with the authority to speak on their behalf. However, even when empowered with this authority due to her husband’s inability to be present, while her attempts to voice dissatisfaction are routinely ignored.

Through the depiction of the unfortunate fate of these two protagonists, the female writers Gilman and Zhang offer sharp critiques of the oppression imposed by male-dominant societies, where women are denied the freedom to speak for themselves, and their words are easily

dismissed as nonsensical or unimportant. This dismissive treatment eventually relegates them to the status of “the other”, reinforcing the deeply-rooted power that suppress women’s voices and perspectives.

2. Different Way of Defiance

In “*The Yellow Wallpaper*,” the protagonist’s husband, John, advocates for rest and recovery as the best remedies, yet her condition deteriorates instead of improving. The intricate patterns of the yellow wallpaper influence her, leading to an engrossing, illusory experience where she perceives countless women crawling around the room. The climax of the story unfolds on the last day of the protagonist’s recovery when she tears the yellow wallpaper off the wall to “liberate” the women depicted on it. This action startles her husband, who falls to the ground in surprise. Now resembling a creeper, the protagonist crawls past her unconscious husband, rebelling against paternal rules through her “thorough madness.” The protagonist of the story ultimately struggled to maintain her mental well-being and personal independence. As a woman without economic means and a name that goes unmentioned, she finds herself compelled to fully submit to her husband John. However, throughout the novel, we can discern that, despite being oppressed at every turn, she steadfastly challenges and resists the male authority imposed by her husband.

In “*The Golden Cangue*,” Cao Qiqiao, a victim of such a society,

calmly navigates her own desires for survival and love amidst an unpleasant reality, leading to personality distortion and irrational behaviors. Openly confessing her love for her husband's brother, an audacious and unacceptable act for that time in China, a way of confronting the established patriarchal system. Despite her struggles with fate, she becomes a figure challenging the patriarchy, striving for happiness. However, her life ultimately becomes a tragedy as she acknowledges marriage as a trap but willingly dons the chains of gold.

In the 19th century, societal expectations dictated that most middle- and upper-class women like the protagonist in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*", upon marriage, assumed the role of domestic angels. For many, their talents and wisdom were confined to the private sphere, and their duty was to selflessly sacrifice for the preservation of social stability and the proficient management of family affairs. Unlike the protagonist in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*," Cao Qiqiao's rebellion takes a more gradual and seemingly "mad" and "annoying" path. Although she doesn't exhibit apparent signs of madness, societal descriptions of her differ from those of a normal person. Additionally, Cao Qiqiao's defiance and obedience are influenced more by financial considerations, reflective of the contextual norms of that time. Her madness is the culmination of the intertwined forces of inner feudal ethics and modern objectification desires.

While the reasons driving the "madness" of these two protagonists

differ, the ultimate consequence of their fate is strikingly similar — the result of repression within paternal society. Despite employing different methods of revolt, the shared aim of their actions is evident: to assert their rights to survive in a society that seeks to stifle their autonomy.

III The Descriptions of Images and Figures

“The Golden Cangue” depicts a tragic and profoundly poignant tale written in the 1940s, intricately reflecting the twisted aspects of human nature. The story unfolds with an introduction gradually revealing itself as the curtain rises, and the moon, a recurring motif, embarks on its “mission.” Throughout the story, the moon takes center stage among other symbols, serving as a poignant reflection of the tragedy and inevitability that permeate Cao Qiqiao’s fate. This consistent thematic thread underscores the inescapable nature of her tragedy, mirroring the certainty of the moon’s appearance in the night sky.

The story’s opening straightforwardly and subtly reveals the prologue: “Thirty years ago in Shanghai, under the moon...” Many readers, especially those familiar with Chinese history, are likely aware that Shanghai, thirty years ago, was in the early years of the Republic of China. This writing not only specifies the time and place of the story but also introduces geographical distance and a distinct temporal framework. “Thirty years” represents a fluid concept of time, while the “moon” is an eternal temporal symbol. The interplay between “thirty years” and the “moon” creates

dynamic tension, connecting historical and natural time.

At the story's conclusion, the events of thirty years ago seem to have ended. Once more, the moon serves as a "conduit", transporting readers from the temporal space within the narrative back to the current reality. The moon that illuminated events thirty years ago has long set, and the individuals of that era are no more. However, the narrative from thirty years ago endures, incomplete and lingering. Cao Qiqiao's world concludes with the curtain falling on her life, but real life continues to unfold. The moon still rises, casting its light upon everything that death can no longer perceive. In this story, the narrative begins and concludes with the moon, the recurring motif running through the entire work, deepening the tragedy's poignancy and consistency.

In "*The Yellow Wallpaper*," the "sunshine" and "moonlight" described in the story can be considered to represent male and female, respectively. Moonlight, gentler and milder than sunlight, becomes the time when the female protagonist desires to express her thoughts. Sunlight symbolizes patriarchy, where women, beneath its rays, conceal their thoughts and conform to male consciousness. Under moonlight, a woman's own consciousness gradually emerges, suppressed for too long under the dominance of daylight, making it challenging for her to express thoughts. Moonlight, compared to sunlight, appears diminutive, reflecting the difficulty women face in voicing themselves in a male-dominated society.

The female protagonist dares to express her thoughts only at night, under the cover of moonlight, as if the moon grants her the courage to voice her opinions without the glaring sun.

In these two stories, “moon” or “moonlight” not only witnesses the tragedy of the protagonists but also serves as their avatars. In Chinese and Western culture, the image of the “moon” holds abundant meaning, serving as the embodiment of females or a friend, partner, or spiritual sustenance. Meanwhile, the change of moonlight is also used to describe the arbitrariness of life. These two female writers describe the moon through their acute female emotion to promote the development of the stories.

In these two stories, the “moon” or “moonlight” not only bears witness to the tragedies of the protagonists but also serves as their avatars. In both Chinese and Western cultures, the image of the “moon” carries rich symbolism, embodying various roles such as that of females, a friend, a partner, or spiritual sustenance. Meanwhile, the shifting phases of moonlight are employed to depict the capricious nature of life. Both of these female writers skillfully describe the moon through their acute emotional understanding, promoting the nuanced development of their stories.

Every human behavior is inherently linked to spatial characteristics, signifying that individuals engage in actions within specific spaces. As mentioned earlier, the portrayal of character traits reflects the characters’

actions, which unfold within particular spatial contexts. In “*The Yellow Wallpaper*,” prior to entering the room each time, the characters must traverse a sequence of gates, fences, partitions, locked courtyard gates, the main door at the staircase, and the securely locked door of the nursery. Inside the house, there are also several separate rooms designated for gardeners and other individuals. The depiction of the house’s structure and the arrangement of objects inside and outside not only metaphorically conveys the protagonist’s life condition in a patriarchal society as “isolated,” “alienated,” and “repressed” but also symbolizes the oppressive living space that women cannot escape in such a society.

Initially, Gilman provides a comprehensive view of a colonial mansion. However, in the subsequent narrative, she confines the spatial setting to a small bedroom adorned with repugnant yellow wallpaper and a barred window—the sole living space for the protagonist. Simultaneously, Gilman offers glimpses of the scene outside the windows through the protagonist’s eyes: “the garden,” “those beautiful, shaded lanes,” “mysterious deep-shaded arbors,” and more. Transitioning from a colonial mansion to bedrooms with yellow wallpaper, Gilman progressively restricts the cognitive scope of the female protagonist. The alteration in spaces communicates a state of female existence and thought within a metaphorical “cage.”

While the mansion may appear luxurious and indestructible, a closer

look inside reveals a broken greenhouse, discordant colors, and dilapidated furniture. The mansion serves as a metaphor for a patriarchal society that appears formidable on the surface but is internally wretched and unsystematic. Women in this society have limited living space and attempting to escape this metaphorical “mansion” is fraught with obstacles that they must overcome.

In “*The Golden Cangue*,” Eileen Chang not only establishes enclosed spaces but also employs a consistent pattern of narrative on progressively smaller scales, forming a “nested-box” style of storytelling within confined environments. She delineates two closed domestic physical spaces: her husband Jiang’s family residence and a rented house. Within these spaces, she incorporates smaller enclosed settings such as bedrooms, tents, smoking couches, and staircases. Through this nested arrangement, the narrative gradually unveils the characters’ psychological states of oppression that wherever Cao Qiqiao goes she is merely confined to a narrowed space.

The recurring theme of “tents” in the story is significant, as Cao Qiqiao’s husband, due to illness, frequently sleeps in them. Cao Qiqiao likens her husband to dehumanized flesh in a pork shop, connecting him to lifelessness, thereby intensifying the oppressive and suffocating atmosphere within the enclosed tent. Meanwhile, after her husband’s death, Zhi Shou, Cao Qiqiao’s daughter-in-law, also occupies a tent that echoes

and extends the symbolism of Cao Qiqiao's husband's tent. Physically confined by illness, Zhi Shou finds himself entangled in the societal burdens imposed by Cao Qiqiao's oppression. In a poignant twist, Cao transitions from being the recipient of oppression to becoming the very source of oppression herself. Confronted with the malicious verbal onslaughts of her mother-in-law, Zhi Shou's only choice for survival is enduring the torment within the tent—an environment permeated with malice and dehumanizing experiences.

The interconnected relationship between these two tents outlines Cao Qiqiao's evolution from being victimized to victimizing others, from being suppressed to suppressing others, and from experiencing misery to causing misery. This narrative fully explores the psychological journey of a woman's transformation from an oppressed individual to a psychologically disturbed oppressor.

Before marrying her husband, Cao Qiqiao was born in a sesame oil shop. Compared to her husband's family house, her former residence was open and full of vitality, where she lived as a vibrant and energetic woman. The comparison between her husband's house and the sesame oil shop can be seen as her pursuit of a free life. The human psyche inherently yearns for freedom and open spaces. Those who have experienced the liberating sensation of breathing freely in open spaces become more sensitive and attuned to the constraints and oppression brought about by enclosed

environments when entering them.

The depictions of space in both stories highlight the constrained and restricted living conditions for females. While these houses may be the object of envy for outsiders, only those residing within can truly grasp the sense of oppression and the pervasive feeling of suffocation. Escaping, enjoying the outdoor scenery, or even just finding a comfortable spot within such homes appears to be a challenging endeavor for the female characters.

IV Diverse yet Similar Realms of Interpersonal Stressors

In the creative process, even if a writer narrates the causes and effects of a story from a God's-eye view, it is impossible to depict each character completely objectively and fairly. Instead, there will be a distinction between main and minor characters, and the narrative will follow the primary perspective of a significant character. The entire intricate storyline will be woven together based on his or her life experiences. The role of a minor character and how he or she carries a double symbolic significance. Specifically, he or she is described as a “synecdoche for” a metaphor, which refers to a figure of speech where a part is used to represent the whole (Woloch, 2003).

In “*The Yellow Wallpaper*,” Gilman records the experience of a woman forced into “Rest cure” in the form of a diary. The narrative is presented in the first-person perspective, with the diarist naturally adopting

the pronoun “I.” The diary format itself adds distinctive characteristics to the narrative. The development of the novel’s plot lacks a traditional beginning, climax, and resolution, and it lacks a tight logical structure. Instead, there are only fragmented scenes, absurd actions, and topsy-turvy language. Even in the diary format, it appears somewhat chaotic, yet from the perspective of “I,” one can glimpse the impact of minor characters on the main characters. As the protagonist, she should have had the most authoritative voice regarding her own illness. However, John, being a highly esteemed physician and the husband of her, owing so-called knowledge and power, successfully constructing his dominance in discourse. Whenever the protagonist expresses her thoughts, John consistently rejects them with various strained justifications, vehemently negating her perspective. In addition to satirizing John’s authoritarian oppression, the author also mocks his insincere concern for the female lead: “He loves me very dearly and hates to have me sick.” John’s sister, Jennie, is also a target of the writer’s satire. Jennie’s image is that of the stereotypically “perfect” woman in the eyes of society, creating a stark contrast with the “madness” of the protagonist. Jennie strictly follows John’s words and believes that everything he does to the protagonist is justified, thus becoming a sacrificial figure within the patriarchal system. The protagonist’s brother, being a male physician, appears to utilize unquestionable authority, firmly siding with John and essentially

“abandoning” his sister. While the narrator doesn’t delve deeply into the characterization of minor figures, the pervasive oppression from both the family of origin and married life, stemming from males and individuals of the same gender, is evident throughout the protagonist’s life.

Fundamental literary character examination instructs us that every narrative comprises diverse character categories shaping the plot. We can differentiate between round and flat characters, leading figures, and adversaries. Round characters possess complexity and undergo transformations and flat characters also play a crucial role in advancing the storyline (Keen, 2003). In “*The Golden Cangue*,” there are primarily two categories of minor characters. The first category includes figures such as the servants of the Jiang family and the sister-in-law of Qiqiao. These characters are relatively flat in their portrayal, with the narrator adopting an external perspective. The narrative maintains a considerable distance from the viewpoint of the main character, Cao Qiqiao, using these characters primarily for exposition and background. For instance, the initial conversations between the Jiang family’s two servants regarding Qiqiao and the dialogue among the sister-in-law vividly reveal Qiqiao’s humble background, the reasons behind her marriage, her coarse and bold personality, as well as the tensions and conflicts within the Jiang’s family. This sets the stage for the tragic tone of the entire text. The second category of characters includes figures like Jiang Jize—Qiqiao’s brother-in-law,

Qiqiao's children, and Zhishou—Qiqiao's daughter-in-law. When narrating these characters, the external and internal perspectives are seamlessly integrated, enriching the narrative depth and rounding out the characters. Through the trajectories of these characters' actions and psychological activities, the text vividly depicts how Qiqiao gradually descends into psychological distortion, becoming cruel, ruthless, and merciless. In destroying others, she inexorably propels herself into the tragic course of life.

By depicting minor characters, "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" and "*The Golden Cangue*" depict the arduous lives of female protagonists within a patriarchal society. The cruelty they endure emanates not solely from males but also from other females who are entirely "domesticated" by such a societal framework, ultimately pushing them towards a state of "madness."

V Conclusion

Renowned for its authentic setting and groundbreaking perspectives, "*The Yellow Wallpaper*" stands as a masterpiece in the realms of psychology and the feminist movement. Even today, its exploration of concepts such as freedom and equality between men and women remains highly pertinent. In "*The Golden Cangue*," Cao Qiqiao's examination and subtle defiance of Confucian principles related to women's conduct can be connected to the gender dynamics prevalent in early twentieth-century Shanghai (Li, 2010). The female protagonist in the former story even "loses"

her name, which the narrative never mentions. This is not merely a concealment of a name but an obscured injustice and a deprivation of the right to speak for females themselves. This phenomenon can be likened to the place of females in a paternal society where women are invisible, resembling a “dark continent” (Freud, 1926). Both authors of these stories are female, using exquisite language to narrate two tales of “mad” women. Despite living in different centuries and countries, the unfortunate characters under their pens share a similar fate. The analysis of these two stories can remind us of the severe issues faced by contemporary females that even centuries passed not a few females still are regarded as “the other” and gradually get mad due to unequal treatment. The examination of these two stories serves as a reminder of the profound challenges contemporary women continue to face, as a result of unequal treatment who find themselves gradually succumbing to madness.

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