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DERRIDEAN 'PARERGA' AND THE GOTHIC: A STUDY OF *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

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ABSTRACT

Logocentric readings of gothic texts are insufficient as there is always a kind of confinement, a restriction and a prohibition in the process of signification. Thus gothic texts must be read with a pluralistic point of view. The Derridean notion of the parerga is a major theoretical tool to study hidden structures and find deferred contexts of gothic texts. The sublimity of gothic meanings is only revealed when the out of frame technique is utilized.

Keywords: Logocentrism, parerga, gothic, irrationality and the sublime.

Roland Barthes in order to analyse the factors behind the creation and the reception of an image or a photograph illustrated the way in which it is encoded at first and finally decoded by its viewers. In his famous theoretical book *Image, Music, Text* Barthes elucidated the concept extensively in the chapter entitled 'The Photographic Message' as;

... the scene itself, the literal reality. From the object to its image there is of course a reduction-in proportion, perspective, colour-but at no time is this reduction a 'transformation'...Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect 'analogon' (Barthes, 17)

According to Barthes, the encoding of an image depends on the style. Style is a product of a specific culture and the outlook of the style is reflected in the image or a photograph it produces. The meanings of a photograph are generated with a general consensus. Nevertheless, the meanings decoded from a reception of a photograph are always insufficient to the context, as there is always a lack of exactness. In fact, Barthes rightly argues

that to describe a photograph with 'analogical plenitude' is literally impossible. The practice of finding analogies or meanings in a photograph is not impractical or imprecise, but it always remains partial as there is always a need of further interpretation. Additional information is always left out as the reading is always done in a closed manner or in other words the interpretation remains always frame bound.

The impossibility of signification is thus an important corollary. One possible reason for this impossibility of signification is the investigative nature of the human mind. The problem does not appear dissimilar even in the case of gothic studies. Gothic is a part of the irrational as we all know which leaves always a wide open space for diverse signification and contextualization. The irrational is more varied than the rational in that the former devises newer methods and manifestations whereas the latter is restricted to the sphere of centrality. The irrational is the other to rationality and thus it always maintains a contesting relationship. The irrational releases repressed ideas that are obstructed by the governance of rationality. It is precisely for this reason that gothic

texts should be read out of the frame of a text. It is in that way the investigation of meanings of gothic texts can be done in a more accurate manner. But before investigating on the de-framed manifestations of gothic images it is necessary to look into the famous essay "On the Pleasure derived from the Objects of Terror" by J.L. Aikin. In this famous essay Aikin argues that:

The painful sensation immediately arising from a scene of misery...on the whole [is] a very exquisite and refined pleasure...which makes us desirous of again being witnesses to such scenes instead of flying from them with disgust and horror. (Aikin, 3)

From Aikin's essay we find two issues; the reason why the audience or the reader of a horror scene does not move away from the scene and why they show an increasing tendency to look for further associations and connotations. In the year 1757 Edmund Burke published his famous philosophical book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, where the author superbly cited the reasons behind the operational principle of pleasure derived from objects of terror and horror. In 'Section VII' of this book entitled 'Of the Sublime' Burke commented that:

...whatever is in any sort terrible, or in conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime, it is productive of the strongest emotion. (Burke, 36)

For Burke, thus terror leads to torment, pain and suffering both physical and psychological, and has a much greater effect on us than any kind of pleasure. It is also important to note that "...terror is in all cases whatsoever either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime"¹.

In the essay "On the Pleasure derived from the Objects of Terror" mentioned earlier Aikin postulated that;

The pain of suspense, and the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity, when once raised, will account for our eagerness to go quite through an adventure, though we suffer to choose pain during the whole of

it. We rather choose to suffer the smart pang of a violent emotion than the uneasy craving of an unsatisfied desire.(Aikin, 123)

Therefore, one issue is quite clearly perceived that the more pleasure is derived from the objects of terror and horror the more increasing amount of desire is evolved. It is precisely because of this ruling principle that the investigation or the process of meaning generation never achieves its finality.

Ghosts are no longer restricted to the specified area of a text. The reason is they observe multifarious symbolic representations outside the text. The concept of extra-textual belonging of ghosts and their behaviour if related with haunting develop a theory called 'Hauntology'². In her seminal book entitled *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts* Christine Berthin following Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* argues that "neither alive, nor dead, [the] Derridean spectre hovers between presence and absence, making it impossible to assign meanings to things" (Introduction, 3). The logocentric notion regarding any kind of connotation of ghosts have been under erasure for long. A recent reading of a gothic text will engage the pluralistic dimensions of postmodernism in order to unleash hidden meanings outside the boundary of a text.

The researcher of this article has attempted a postmodern reading of the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman by utilizing the theory of Derridean 'Parergon'.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" begins with the unnamed narrator-woman who is undergoing a treatment of hysteria through 'rest cure'. Her husband John is caring towards her, but he is also misunderstanding and rigid. John is accompanied by his sister Jennie. For treatment the narrator is taken to a lonely house where a room has been leased and where she must take a complete rest. The room which is selected for her stay is a nursery room where walls are covered with torn wallpaper and the floor is scratched. The mansion is nice and aristocratic but even in the narrator's words "had something queer about it".

The hysteria of the unnamed narrator is a key to our theoretical understanding. The story is told in the first person point of view and all the descriptions of happenings inside the room need critical attention. The room in which the woman is kept has a peculiar kind of a portrait that has a hidden shape of a woman figure. This other woman figure in the portrait gains much importance in the life of the narrator. The picture does not appear as a non living object as it continually irritates, motivates, alarms and stirs the narrator with its awful appearance. The wallpaper also does not have a central point of signification as it develops a myriad of underlying patterns that refer to different shapes. The experience of the woman narrator that she has had is mentioned in the beginning of this story as:

This wallpaper has a kind of sub pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then.

But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so - I can see strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.(Gilman, 145-46)

The subsumed pattern behind the frontal part of the portrait draws our attention. The pattern can be dealt with two theoretical perspectives; one, the frontal part of the pattern is a product of rationality and a locus of logos or the centre that can only be defined in terms of singularity, formed by the frame in which the picture is bound; two, the outer space of the wallpaper that is attached with the frame and revealing the underlying patterns hidden inside.

Irrationality is the key tool to analyse the design of the wallpaper. Irrationality, unlike rationality, can investigate on the hidden codes, messages, structures in a pluralistic dimension. It is because of the woman's hysteria and irrational behaviour that we are able to expose the truths hidden beneath the frontal edifice.

Even though the quasi-patriarchal order is imposed on the woman by her husband she is able

to juxtapose disjointed experiences that she has inside the room. The narrator wants her to be free of the confinement because of the claustrophobia of the room and the queerness of the wallpaper. But her freedom is restricted by her husband. The emancipation of the caged woman in the wallpaper through the imaginative sphere of the narrator is a symbolic manifestation of freedom and relaxation from the imposed orders of rationality. In other words, the emancipation of the woman-narrator from the rules of his pressing husband happens too exactly when the narrator herself is freed by becoming an acute hysteric.

Thus the imagistic woman has a great influence on the woman narrator. In one of her experiences about the woman in the image the narrator conveys us that;

It was moonlight. The moon shines in all around just as the sun does...I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wallpaper till I felt creepy.

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out. (Gilman, 148)

This experience of the woman narrator is not unnatural as she herself feels suffocated staying inside that room. The desires like roaming outside the room, loitering in the gardens or in the premises of the mansion, sitting under the cool shade of the trees, walking in the shaded pathways are unfulfilled cravings of her soul. The world outside the room is the dreamy world for the narrator. Just as the narrator wants to enjoy freedom in life, the woman in the pictorial cage also exhibits the same behaviour. It is like both of them sharing the same kind of experience. The fact is evident in these lines;

Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern 'does' move — no wonder!

The woman inside shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over...I think that woman gets out in the daytime!...I see her on that long road under the trees creeping along (Gilman, 152)

Slowly by degrees, the pictorial embedded in the wallpaper gathers its significance as its impact is seen outside the boundary of the frame. It is observed for several times in the short story that the woman in the pictorial attempts to move out of the caging. The reasons can be put up with the help of a Derridean philosophy of the parergon.

The parergon is a kind of an extra entity or a supplement that implies a lack in the very frame it encloses. Following the Derridean concept of the parergon we can say that the woman inside the pictorial feels a lack and this lacuna is to be satisfied with her influence on the woman. The frame itself implies a kind of containment, a signification, a centrality, logos of an imperfect ideology³. The husband of the narrator, a physician, has not only restrained her but also has enhanced her psychological instability. Her confinement in that nursery room has only locked her up. The room has become of ideational logos that has closed the ways toward the recesses of her mind. Thus, in this closed mental state the narrator feels a constant dearth of pleasure. Both the woman in the picture and the woman in reality are in want of something extra that their living is unable to offer. The confinement of the woman narrator is like a curse on her. The condition of the woman narrator is like the confined lady in the tower in Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott*. In the poem *The Lady of Shalott* Tennyson beautifully describes the angst, agonies and melancholic state of being of the lady for whom the world outside the tower is more lovely and open. Gilman similarly depicts the restrained state of the narrator more acutely with the binary of the world outside the room.

In order to comprehend the psychology of the woman we must have to "establish the laws of reappropriation, [and] formalize the rules which constrain the logic of the abyss and [to] shuttle

between the economic and the aneconomic, the raising and the fall"⁴.

In his book *Truth in Painting* Jacques Derrida has written a critique of Immanuel Kant's seminal book *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this book Derrida argues that;

The critique of pure reason assumes the exclusion of all that is not theoretical knowledge: the affect in its two principal values (pleasure/unpleasure) and the power to desire. It cuts out its field only by losing interest in desire. From the moment that understanding alone can give constitutive principles to knowledge, the exclusion bears simultaneously on reason which transgresses the limits of possible knowledge of nature...the critique of pure theoretical reason thus excludes both reason and desire, desire's reason and reason's desire, the desire for reason. (Derrida, 38)

This paragraph from Derrida's book is the key to an understanding of the character of John, the husband of the narrator. John is a product of rationality but he is also a philosopher citing a priori judgments because he rules out what is beyond rationality. John is a misogynist who treats her wife like a child. Throughout the story John is never seen to be giving any value to the arguments made by his wife about the queeriness of the wallpaper. John is like a rationalistic master who denies all possibilities of meaning beyond his comprehension. This constitutive philosophy is superbly put to question when the hysteria of his wife reaches its climax. It is through her hysteric sublimity that the narrator is able to understand the meanings of the pictorial beyond the frame. The acuity of hysteria also helps to reveal the symbolic meaning of the creeping performed by the pictorial woman. The frame of the picture, the annexure to it (the wallpaper), the room and the outside world are made prominent by the use of extra space.

It can also be said that John's diagnosis of hysteria in his wife is product of a particular philosophy. As Derrida states,

a critique of pure reason, i.e., of our faculty of judging according to a priori principles, would be "incomplete" if a theory of judgement...did not form a 'particular part' of it...but the principles of judgement would not form a 'detached part, between the theoretical part and the practical part, but could be attached, annexed to each of the two. (Derrida, 38-39)

Thus John has to follow certain rules otherwise his diagnosis of the disease would have been incomplete. Likewise unless John's wife became an acute hysteric his diagnosis would not have gathered its signification. Both these incidents are analogous to each other. Finally, the hysteria of the narrator and her irrationality has successfully revealed the quintessence of the extra indicated in the picture.

Notes

1. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*
2. See Berthin, Christine. *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts*
3. 'imperfect ideology' means the logocentric and rationalistic ideology of the husband of the narrator.
4. Jacques Derrida. 'Parergon', *Truth in Painting*, 37.

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