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Kristevan Abjection in Muriel Spark and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Female Narratives

Muriel Spark ve Charlotte Perkins Gilman'in Kadın Anlatılarında Kristeva'nın Zelil Kavramı

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Abstract

Viewing linguistic and semiotic processes as constitutive of self, Julia Kristeva emphasizes the role of abjection in the construction of female subjectivity. Abjection corresponds to a state of subjectivity dominated by in-betweenness in which the distinction between the subject and the object is blurred, while this experience is necessary for the subject to complete the subjectivization process. This paper aims to scrutinize the function of this Kristevan conception in two short stories written by women recounting the experiences of their female protagonists: Muriel Spark's "You Should Have Seen the Mess" (1958) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899). Revolving around an utter sense of abjection, these works reflect the protagonists' obsessive attachment to and abhorrence for the abject as well as their problematic position in relation to the semiotic and symbolic linguistic realms. Both protagonists are in search of alternative ways of coping with their subjugation in a patriarchal society, through an existence outside of social norms and expectations. Consequently, female subjectivity is regarded as an on-going social process rather than a finished one in both texts, whereby the activities of female subjectivity constitute avenues by which women can reposition and empower themselves within a patriarchal system.

Keywords: Abjection, Kristeva, Female Subjectivity, Muriel Spark, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Öz

Linguistik ve semiyotik süreçleri öznenin oluşumunun bir parçası olarak gören Julia Kristeva, kadın öznelliğinin inşasında zelilin rolünü vurgular. Zelil, özne ile nesne arasındaki ayrımın bulanıklaştığı, arada kalmışlığın hâkim olduğu bir öznelllik durumuna karşılık gelirken, bu deneyim öznenin özneleşme sürecini tamamlaması için gereklidir. Bu çalışma, Kristeva'nın bu anlayışının, kadınlar tarafından yazılmış ve kadın kahramanlarının deneyimlerini anlatan iki kısa öyküdeki işlevini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır: Muriel Spark'ın "You Should Have Seen the Mess" (1958) ve Charlotte Perkins Gilman'ın "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899). Mutlak bir zelil duygusu etrafında dönen bu eserler, kahramanların zelile olan saplantılı bağlılık ve tiksintilerinin yanı sıra semiyotik ve sembolik dilsel alanlara ilişkin sorunlu konumlarını da yansıtır. Her iki kahraman da toplumsal norm ve beklentilerin dışında bir varoluş yoluyla ataerkil bir toplumdaki boyun eğdirilmişlikleriyle başa çıkmanın alternatif yollarını aramaktadır. Sonuç olarak, kadın öznelliği her iki metinde de bitmiş bir süreçten ziyade devam eden bir sosyal süreç olarak görülmekte ve kadın öznelliğinin faaliyetleri kadınların ataerkil bir sistem içinde kendilerini yeniden konumlandırabilecekleri ve güçlendirebilecekleri yollar oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zelil, Kristeva, Kadın Öznelliği, Muriel Spark, Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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Introduction

Subjectivity has always been a point of intersection for disciplines as diverse as philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, literature, and many others. For Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst, semiotician, and feminist literary critic, the subject is a speaking being, a linguistic entity constituted by a signifying process in which the meaning is conveyed through the oscillation between the unconscious drives and conscious mechanisms of language. As part of the post-structuralist attempts to deal with the idea of subjectivity, Kristeva theorizes female subjectivity in terms of its close relationship with language. Subjectivity is constructed by forces outside the subject herself/himself: culture, society, history and language. Therefore, far from being static and essential, her notion of subjectivity is in a constant state of change. She defines the individual as a 'speaking subject' or a 'speaking being', underlying the idea that the subject is constructed by and within a linguistic realm, which is an indispensable process for understanding subjectivity.

The concept of subjectivity is inherently dynamic and cannot be viewed as a static entity. The linguistic and social dimensions are constantly evolving and influencing the construction of the self. Kristeva's psychoanalytical approach highlights the multifaceted nature of female subjectivity, encompassing diverse spheres of influence. Subjectivity involves processes of an individual's development that begin in the womb until she/he gradually attains independence from the maternal bond. This process culminates in the formation of a fully developed subject, or to put it differently, a speaking subject well-positioned within language and society. Human subjectivity is, thus, a lifelong process based on a double representation: semiotic and symbolic. For the successful development of the subjectivization process, one needs to both connect to the maternal body and detach from it when the time comes, which in turn will position her/him in the linguistic system and thus in society. As relationships with others are shaped within language, subjectivity also becomes a never-ending process in which the individual keeps defining who s/he is through language and interconnectivity. Both semiotic and symbolic, in other words, play an integral role in subjectivity. The symbolic corresponds to what exists within the realm of language, whereas the semiotic means what exists beyond it, to put their distinction in simple terms. These two aspects of the signification process are also in an interplay that puts a subject in a state of constant change and trial (Kristeva, 1984, p. 22). The semiotic represents a pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal, preverbal, maternal and poetic territory that is outside the realm of language: "[U]nfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation," as Kristeva puts it, "it is musical, anterior to judgement" (1984, p. 29). Unlike the semiotic, the symbolic represents the subject in relation to language and the signification process within it as it is an "attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 134). Viewing language as constitutive of subjectivity, Kristeva also emphasizes the "heterogeneous" nature of language which is, as Oliver (1993b) puts it, "composed of both symbols and semiotic drives" (p. 54). Indeed, it is essential that the subject be adequately positioned within the linguistic domain if they are to become a full member of their society. However, as the theory of abject manifests, "the negative side of the dialectic is that the semiotic threatens the symbolic realm" (Albayrak, 2023, p. 426).

In addition to the linguistic elements of being, the construction of the speaking subject is also contingent upon corporeality and the body, as Kristeva posits the concept of abjection as a constitutive element of subjectivity. This can be considered an alternative to the patriarchal subordination of the body, which in turn becomes pivotal in the formation of the subject. It is essential, as Kristeva contends, for the subject to differentiate between themselves and the other in order to be situated in the symbolic order. As a consequence of this separation, the infant begins to establish boundaries surrounding 'I', which are now under threat from the abject, which is normally rejected or excluded. The abjection is, therefore, an oscillation for the infant between a quest for a narcissistic identification with its mother (that is a part of itself) and a necessity to renounce this unity in order to become a subject itself. This is, in fact, a prerequisite for the infant to enter the symbolic register and become a speaking being. Finally, this sense of abject accompanies the subject throughout her/his life, and thus it is a never-ending process. Thus, the abject becomes incorporated into the process of signification within language when the subject transgresses the symbolic and returns to the semiotic, which also results in the return of the repressed abject.

Kristeva develops the concepts of the abject and abjection based on the symptoms observed in certain clinical cases in which, as she puts it in Hatred and Forgiveness (2010), "the distinction between 'subject' and 'object' is not clear, and in which these two pseudo-entities exhaust themselves in a dialectic of attraction and repulsion" (p. 12). This is an ongoing process beginning with the child's relation with the mother that is "the first 'abject' rather than object" (2010, p. 12), and reminiscent of this original abjection, the abject experience reiterates in future interactions with others in diverse forms. The abject is in fact something unidentifiable which is "radically excluded" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2), rejected and undesirable. Lechte (1990) explicates the abject as "the ambiguous, the in-between, what defies boundaries, a composite resistant to unity" (p. 160). The abject, or the thing outside the subject that poses a threat to her/his ego boundaries is, however, vital for the subjectivization to take place. In Kristeva's theory, "it is only through the delimitation of the 'clean and proper' body that the symbolic order, and the acquisition of a sexual and physical identity within it, becomes possible" (Gross, 2012, p. 86). Although it is impossible to identify the abject, its presence is discernible in the face of danger, as evidenced by the subject's

tendency to lose autonomy and detachment. The abject is created through the subject's desire to establish boundaries between themselves and the other. This process allows the subject to gain autonomy in a society dominated by patriarchal norms. In Kristeva's words, "I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). The mother's milk is one example of the abject for Kristeva as it creates certain bodily reactions in the face of one's encounter with the other, such as "a gagging sensation," "spasms in the stomach, the belly," "all the organs [that] shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehand and hands to perspire" and "sight-clouding dizziness, nausea" (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 2-3). Despite the difficulty of defining the abject in concrete terms, Kristeva (2010) contends that some artists, like Picasso, have been able to reflect it in art (p. 12). The abjection is viewed as a transgressive experience of intersubjectivity, upon which Kristeva bases her socio-political theory. The relationship with the other, frequently in a compromised form, has further implications for the concept of being, which is defined by abject:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5)

In this sense, it is through this breakdown that the subject both undergoes fragmentation and seeks ways to re-constitute itself. This paper, then, sets out to examine the role of abjection in the constitution of female subjectivity by pursuing two female protagonists in their day-to-day social interactions. It poses the question of whether female subjectivity is represented as fixed or fluid in these texts, and how this condition contributes to women's emancipation within patriarchy. It also undertakes to show how the operations of female subjectivity serve as alternative avenues for women to relocate and empower themselves within a patriarchal society.

Representation of Abjection in Spark's "You Should Have Seen the Mess" and Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Kristevan conceptions can be employed for an in-depth analysis of the female subjects in two short stories written by women: Muriel Spark's "You Should Have Seen the Mess" (1958) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899). Both Spark and Gilman's works of fiction revolve around a sheer sense of abjection of their female protagonists. What they have in common are the persistent effect of this overwhelming feeling in their lives, their obsessive attachment to and abhorrence for the abject, their hindrance from a relationship with the other due to a shattered subjectivity as well as their problematic position in relation to the semiotic and symbolic linguistic realms. They both end up in a quest for evasion and a struggle to free themselves from this feeling of repulsion. Through a corporeal positioning in this process, these two women attempt a defiance of the subjectivity imposed upon them within the patriarchal system. What these two protagonists –first-person narrators –experience during their subjectivization can be explored with recourse to Kristeva's conception of the abject.

One of Kristeva's most significant concepts to understand female subjectivity is abjection, which can be defined as "the state of abjecting or rejecting what is other to oneself – and thereby creating borders of an always tenuous 'I'" (McAfee, 2004, p. 45). In this sense of abjection, the other is considered a threat to ego boundaries and a menace to the stabilized psychic material of the individual. In fact, this other could be associated with anything that gives rise to this aversive feeling. Kristeva explicates this loathsome sense of abjection:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them (1982, p. 2).

This sense is characterized not only by utter loathing but also by fascination. The subject both wants to flee from and go towards the abject as it is simultaneously repugnant and attractive. This description of the abject is essential for making sense of the predicament of both Spark's protagonist, Lorna, and Gilman's unnamed female character. The idea of abjection defines their sense of female subjectivity and their relationships with others.

Lorna is a seventeen-year-old typist who gets a job in a solicitor's office as soon as she leaves school; however, this start exposes her to the mess of the outside world, which is in stark contrast to the orderliness of her own home. The last word of the title, "mess", is a much-used expression throughout the text, as she becomes involved with various people and places that she finds somehow dirty, disorderly and inappropriate. Her entry into business is "a first-class start" (Spark, 2001, p. 242) as her father puts it, but she is disillusioned upon the discovery of the mess in the offices: no floor covering, crumpled box files, cracked cups, and missing saucers. Just from the onset, she is preoccupied with examining everything –windows, stairs, furniture, bookcases, and so on – just to find out that they are not clean and hygienic, and ends up quitting her first job after just one week. When the nature of her relationship with her parents is revealed, it becomes apparent that her hygiene-obsessed attitude towards places and objects is not a simple compulsion with cleanliness. She finds it difficult to

make a connection with the outside world, which threatens her with its dirt, with the abject, and in fact, this disconnection is reinforced by her parents who encourage her to leave her work for the same reason as hers: lack of hygiene and order.

Lorna's ego-boundaries are vulnerable in the course of her interaction with the abject that is signified by what she loathes most, sometimes by a person who desires to transpose her ego limits, at others by objects she finds revolting. To put it another way, she feels aversion for the other who tries to shatter the distinction between herself as the subject and the other as the object. As Becker-Leckrone (2005) puts it, this is in fact "a precondition of subjectivity itself, one of the key dynamics by which those borders of the self get established in the first place" (p. 151). This sense of abjection persists even when the individual in question is no longer in contact with the source of their abjection, as the abject other is not a fixed entity but rather a constantly evolving phenomenon.

The domicile of Lorna is free from any potential sources of threat to her subjectivity since her "Mum keeps it spotless" and "Dad keeps doing things to it" to re-modernize it (Spark, 2001, p. 243). They are pleased with the Health Visitor's remark that "You could eat off your floor," which she agrees with, adding that "you could eat your lunch off Mum's floors, and any hour of the day or night you will find every corner spick and span" (Spark, 2001, p. 243). Her home is her danger-free territory where she is away from the abject, the menacing other. The language employed by her parents is also markedly different from that used by others outside the family, lacking the profanity and slang that she encounters in her daily interactions.

Their own world is a locus for order, not only of the physical surroundings, but also of human conduct and language. What remains outside these norms or systems alarms her for a potential menace. In Kristeva's (1982) terms, "[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4). In Lorna's case, the ambiguity that arises from the abject other poses a threat to the processes of subjectivity. For instance, she takes her colleague, Mr. Heygate's inquiries as a threat and develops a sense of aversion:

Then at the end of the week, when I got my salary, Mr. Heygate said, "Well, Lorna, what are you going to do with your first pay? I did not like him saying this, and I nearly passed a comment, but I said, "I don't know." He said, "What do you do in the evenings, Lorna? Do you watch Telly?" I did take this as an insult, because we call it TV, and this remark made me out to be uneducated. I just stood, and did not answer, and he looked surprised. Next day, Saturday, I told Mum and Dad about the facilities, and we decided I should not go back to that job. (Spark, 2001, p. 243)

Obviously, she rejects Mr. Heygate's attempts at communication, deeming his questions to be a form of verbal aggression. She regards them as an insult caused by a disorderly use of language. This is a testament to her obsession with not only physical hygiene but also linguistic purity and order. As a result, she retreats to her own domain in an attempt to elude the other's threat.

Lorna's repugnance for what is filthy and disorderly is more than an obsession for hygiene; it is an urge to protect her own terrain of subjectivity. As Gross puts it,

Kristeva is fascinated by the ways in which 'proper' sociality and subjectivity are based on the expulsion or exclusion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly elements of its corporeal existence that must be separated from its 'clean and proper' self. The ability to take up a symbolic position as a social and speaking subject entail the disavowal of its modes of corporeality, especially those representing what is considered unacceptable, unclean or anti-social (2012, p. 86).

Such a socialization process becomes manifest in Lorna's interactions with others. In her newly formed relationship with the doctor couple, Mr. and Mrs. Darby, her obsession for the "spotless" becomes symptomatic: "I had to wait in their living-room, and you should have seen the state it was in! There were broken toys on the carpet, and the ash trays were full up" (Spark, 2001, p. 244). The relationship between Mrs. Darby and her child serves to illustrate the contrast with the maternal relationship between Lorna's mother and her children. This semiotic relationship with the mother represents the primordial abjection for the subject in Kristeva's conception. As Bové (2006) emphasizes, abjection is the simultaneous attraction and repulsion for the body that derives from the moment when the child's symbiosis with the mother is interrupted [once] the child comes to recognize the father's authority underlying the social contract, the bond enabling one to learn a language. (p. 84)

In fact, this primary abjection is a required pre-condition for subjectivity formation in which the subject is supposed to separate her/himself from the mother's abject body so that s/he can start her/his signification process. However, in Lorna's case, this process is problematized by her mother's extreme preoccupation with keeping everything clean, which hinders Lorna from enduring the process of abjection slickly. It is within this process that there occurs "a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 13). Lorna, in this respect, seems to grapple with identifying the abject so that she can expel it. This impossible task is pinpointed in the narration as Lorna explains that "Mum always kept us spotless to go out to play" (Spark, 2001, p. 244). Due to this spotlessness, she fails to recognize that the other is something to be expelled, to be rejected.

Kristeva emphasizes the impossibility to totally detach oneself from the threatening, unwanted other, which keeps returning in one form or another throughout one's life. The subject's preoccupation with this impossible task of expulsion amounts to what Kristeva calls abjection, which is the precondition of subjectivity. As Lorna is unable to expel such repulsive elements, the borderline between her 'I' and what is primarily other to her, her mother, cannot be drawn precisely; therefore, whenever Lorna feels impended by the outside forces, she goes back to her maternal domain. For instance, a match has been made by the Darbys between Lorna and a chemist's assistant who is "a good-looking boy" (Spark, 2001, p. 245) and "quite clean in appearance" (2001, p. 245) for her; however, she finally rejects him because of "those little extras" (2001, p. 245): "But there was only hot water at the weekend at his place, and he said that a bath once a week was sufficient" (2001, p. 245). It becomes apparent that she not only avoids the unpleasant interaction he initiates, but also evades the threat to the boundaries of her subjectivity. She befriends another boy, Willy Morley, who is an artist with a disorderly style of living. She observes him as "young, dark, with a dark shirt, so one could not see right away if he was clean" (Spark, 2001, pp. 246-7). He wants to make a painting of her, but his place and his intimacy arouse a sense of abjection: "I can honestly say that Willy's place was the most unhygienic place I have seen in my life. […] I did not like to go back there" (Spark, 2001, p. 247). She has a changeable feeling towards him; like the abject, she can neither accept him nor disintegrate herself from him easily. Oscillating between a sense of attraction and abhorrence, she admits that "I could not deny that I liked Willy, in a way. There was something about him" (Spark, 2001, p. 247). This evinces that what she feels is abjection; McAfee (2004) explains this as "objectal depression": "It will never be an object for her, but an unnameable thing" (p. 61). She fails to name what is other or object to her, so this other begins to be both fascinating and repugnant for her: "The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). In Kristeva's terms, this abjection leads her towards and away from the boy simultaneously.

Her mother also ensures linguistic sterility, renouncing any irregular, disorderly or improper aspects of language. Lorna recognizes this different linguistic attitude when she hears Mrs. Darby's words:

One day, when I was there, Mavis (as I called Mrs. Darby by then) put her head out of the window, and shouted to the boy, "John, stop peeing over the cabbages at once. Pee on the lawn." I did not know which way to look. Mum would never say a word like that from the window, and I know for a fact that Trevor would never pass water outside, not even bathing the sea (Spark, 2001, p. 245).

From Lorna's point of view here, it is manifest that she is unable to confront the improper, unacceptable language, which represents a barrier to her future socialization. Thus, this sense of abjection persists throughout her life.

Lorna's preoccupation with the linguistic realm seems to be a culmination of a challenging positioning in a system in which the infant's language acquisition takes place. That she is excluded from the symbolic realm is evinced in her problematic relationship with language and its rules. At the very beginning of her narration, she reveals that she could not pass into the Grammar School although she "was always good at English, but not so good at the other subjects!" (Spark, 2001, p. 242). Her failure to be accepted to the school seems to be a testament to her restricted entry to both linguistic and social processes due to a semiotic disruption of the symbolic realm. She is consumed by a relentless pursuit of a university education that is driven by a deep-seated desire to access the symbolic realm, a realm that she is unable to fully engage with due to her lack of formal education. As an artist, Willy epitomizes the semiotic, which is predominantly defined by disorderly elements. Just like many other instances in which Lorna feels threatened by a sense of disorder, Willy's chaotic lifestyle aggravates her:

I saw that one could not do anything with him. He would not change his shirt very often, or get clothes, but he went around like a tramp […] His place was in a terrible mess, with the empty bottles, and laundry in the corner (Spark, 2001, p. 247).

On the other hand, her need to keep up with the hygiene standards of her house symbolizes her quest for a place in the symbolic space. Her positioning in the symbolic is imaginary as well as illusory; she has a tendency to emphasize her language skills: "I was sent by the agency to a publisher's for an interview, because of being good at English" (Spark, 2001, p. 243). Her constant emphasis on her linguistic skills and preoccupation with the symbolic becomes an attestation to her quest to become a speaking subject. Therefore, after an unsuccessful encounter with the other, she returns home which is an epitome of regularity, propriety, and morality. However, due to her unstable subjectivity, she keeps oscillating between the semiotic and symbolic realms.

The female protagonist in "The Yellow Wallpaper" bears a number of similarities with Lorna in terms of an utter sense of abjection as well as her inapt position in the symbolic register, that is, within society. Gilman's female protagonist is completely relegated to an enclosed private sphere, and thus, unable to participate in the community. In this short story, Gilman is concerned with her female protagonist's existential and psychological predicament, which is purported to result from a lack of acceptance in the public domain. The absence of such avenues may give rise to psychological conditions, as elucidated by Kristeva's theory.

Kristeva (1982) points at the connection between the abject and its threat to ego-boundaries:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark re-volts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. (p. 1)

This definition of the abject is in tune with Gilman's protagonist's obsession with the yellow, stained and torn-off wallpaper in her bedroom, which turns out to be similar to the loathsome feeling Lorna is also familiar with. Like Lorna, her mental condition confines her into the terrain of the house, where she is abstracted from the rules of society, or the symbolic. In a similar manner with Lorna, she limits her interaction with the outside world to a minimum level, excluding even her husband and her baby from her own private territory. Likewise, her problematic relationship with language echoes that of Lorna's, though in a different way. Her desire to write in a private diary is constrained by her physician husband, who perceives this act as a detrimental influence on her "slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman, 2000, p. 139). The Greek-originated word hysteria, etymologically derived from the uterus, implies a connection between the female protagonist and the womb, which relegates her to the sphere of the semiotic rather than the symbolic. Obviously, she can never be situated properly within the space of the symbolic; moreover, due to her hysterical disposition her language tends to be semiotic that is deprived of order, regularity, and a clear sense of time. In fact, her repeated attempts to gain access to the symbolic are thwarted by her subsequent process of abjection, which culminates in her oscillating between these two disparate linguistic domains.

The abject, in the case of Gilman's female subject, stems from the overall sense the old and shabby wallpaper creates, which is revealed with gradually explored details about the paper as the story unfolds. "The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. No wonder the children hated it!" (Gilman, 2000, p. 140). Its uncleanliness and its sickly appearance give way to repugnance not only for her but also for the children. The children in question are unidentified, yet her reference to them functions to connect her own experience to a primordial sense of abjection as experienced by infants. The reason for her emphasis on their perspective is that it evokes Lorna's intermittent references to her own childhood. Here also there is the lifelong influence of primal abjection as she likens this feeling to those of infants as it represents something that they abhor, yet remains undefinable. This time the abject has something to do with the thing "beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). From the wallpaper emerge images and patterns that are both impossible and illusory, and which are intolerable and unthinkable for her. These images are beyond her comprehension, and in her quest to understand them, she is compelled to examine them closely:

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide –plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions (Gilman, 2000, p. 140).

The curves are not only uncertain and confusing (beyond possible), but they also destroy themselves (they are elusive, unfathomable). Like the abject, the paper is both irritating and provoking; to put it another way, she fails to remain detached from its overwhelming effect as it cannot be assimilated. Her feelings towards the abject are self-contradictory and double-sided: "I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness" (Gilman, 2000, p. 142). She also explains: "I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toystore" (Gilman, 2000, p. 142). The two phrases with an oxymoronic nature ("positively angry" and "entertainment and terror") parallel the notion of abjection; despite being horrifying, it is attractive and unavoidable. This conflicting sense is reiterated throughout the narrative: "The wallpaper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother –they must have had perseverance as well as hatred" (Gilman, 2000, p. 142). She is always involved in this twofold meaning in her perception of the paper: "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps because of the wallpaper" (Gilman, 2000, p. 143).

The nature of the relationship between the protagonist and the paper remains ambiguous. However, one thing is clear; she has an inherent desire to comprehend the underlying order of the patterns on it: "I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of" (Gilman, 2000, p. 143). It is evident that this image, which haunts her, belongs to the realm of the semiotic. It lacks order, symmetry, and any laws that can align it with the idea of possibility. It can be likened to a work of art or poetic language. This preoccupation with attempting to impose order upon it, to fit it into the symbolic, on her part, is an endeavour that is ultimately futile. The irregularity that the wallpaper embodies is a source of distress for her:

On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind. The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing (Gilman, 2000, p. 146).

This unknown sphere of the semiotic, this resistance to any signification, leads to a rupture in her subjectivity. Kristeva (1984) also defines chora in terms of this rupture: "[T]he chora, as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality. Our discourse –all discourse –moves with and against the chora in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it" (p. 26). In fact, she simultaneously seeks and resists the imposition of order and law in her life. She rejects the laws of medicine her doctor husband imposes upon her, but at the same time, she cannot free herself from its dictates. She secretly carries on her act of writing despite her husband's restrictions. All these evince her oscillating position between the semiotic and symbolic realms, an experience quite similar to that of Lorna's.

It is necessary for the female subject to differentiate between herself and the other in order to be situated in the symbolic. The borders surrounding 'I' are under the menace of being violated by the abject, which is normally rejected or excluded. Thus, as in Lorna's case, the abject comes to be associated with all those nostalgic feelings that remind her of the primal abjection, which is beyond a dislike for the paper itself: "It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw –not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old, foul, bad yellow things" (Gilman, 2000, p. 147). She reveals later that the peculiar smell of the paper also overwhelms her, a trait that makes it very much like the things that cause abjection. Towards the end, she comes to an understanding that the patterns on the paper turn out to be a picture of a woman who shakes the paper. The image of the woman and her ceaseless shaking of the paper are intimately connected to the return of her repressed psychic material, as conceptualized by Kristeva: "What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness" (McAfee, 2004, p. 46). To put it another way, the woman is the abject element, and the act of shaking epitomizes the threatening, the shattering experience that the abject gives way to. She is quite possessive of this imaginary woman, demonstrating a reluctance to allow any form of relationship with it: "I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself" (Gilman, 2000, p. 148). Contradictorily enough, she feels that she is imprisoned within this yellow old wallpaper, while also adding that "I don't want to go outside" (Gilman, 2000, p. 150). However, in the end she comes to hold an illusory feeling that she is eventually freed as she has now torn most of the paper apart, and asserts: "I've got out at last," as "I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman, 2000, p. 151). It is made manifest in this closing remark that her imprisonment is epitomized by the wallpaper, which she associates with abjection and finally manages to get rid of.

Conclusion

In conclusion, female subjectivity is regarded as an ongoing social process rather than a finished one in both texts written by women about women. Abjection is an integral aspect of the socialization process, which informs women's relationship with their society as well as their more assertive positioning within the patriarchal system. In accordance with the indispensable state of abjection in social formation, as Kristeva emphasizes, every society establishes its own abject even though it is founded on the construction of the boundaries and the expulsion of the antisocial. This defines the experiences of both Spark's and Gilman's female protagonists whose interactions with others are characterized by a lack of regularity, order, and law. The societal norms that prevail in a given community are largely shaped by the mechanisms of the mainstream society, which tend to marginalize women, as evidenced by the experiences of the protagonists in this study. As a consequence, both protagonists seek alternate ways to cope with their subjugation in a patriarchal society through an existence outside social norms and expectations. The desire to define what is abject to them and to disengage from a symbiotic tie with it becomes a testament to their quest to become a detached "I." All in all, the confrontation with what they identify as the abject lies at the heart of their social relations, which are in turn constitutive of their intersubjectivity. In this line of thought, these two texts by women can be viewed as attempts to create an insightful exploration of female subjectivity informed by the workings of language and society. It can be argued that women have the capacity to reposition and empower themselves within a patriarchal system through the process of female subjectivity.

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