

Women's Confinement and Struggle Against the Patriarchal Family Structure:

A Feminist Analysis of Selected Women's Writing in the Light of Kate Millett's Concept of Sexual Politics

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the main female characters in two short stories and a novel written in three different periods, using the conceptual analysis framework that Kate Millett puts forward in her 1970 work *Sexual Politics*. In her book *Sexual Politics*, Millett formulated two important concepts as “sexual politics” and “sexual revolution” and focused on how the family institution and genders were handled in literary works. The most important contribution of her work and the reason why it is one of the founding texts of the second wave feminist movement is that she sees the abolition of the traditional family structure as the basic prerequisite for a real sexual revolution. Millett saw the patriarchal social structure as the biggest obstacle to the emancipation of women. In this direction, the present work discusses stories of women who belong to the middle class and try to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers congruously in the traditional family lives of their historical periods, but lose their harmonious existence as soon as they feel that they are confined to this family structure. Studies to be considered are Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Doris Lessing's story "To Room Nineteen" (1963), and Margaret Atwood's novel "The Blind Assassin" (2000).

Keywords: Feminist literature; feminist critics; image of mad woman; kate millett; sexual politics

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to analyze main female characters in two short stories and a novel written in three different periods, using the conceptual analysis framework that Kate Millett put forward in *Sexual Politics* published in 1970. Kate Millett formulated two important concepts as “sexual politics” and “sexual revolution” in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), and criticized the reactionary and sexist writers in the literary world after the first wave feminist movement. This thesis focuses on three literary works that deal with women who belonged to the middle class and tried to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers in the traditional family life of their periods, but found themselves in an impasse, struggled with their confinement and gave different reactions against the alienation and isolation accompanying their confined existence in this patriarchal society. Hence, these women’s experiences and the expression of those experiences through symbols and language invite us to include Millett’s analysis on the reason of this confinement: male-dominant family life.

In this endeavor works to be considered as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen" (1963), and Margaret Atwood's novel "The Blind Assassin" (2000). One of the reasons for choosing these three works is that their protagonists are in similar dilemmas and it is aimed to make sense of the gender politics that drag them into this dilemma through their traditional family structures. Another reason and the factor that is thought to contribute to the reading of feminist literature is that these three works were written at very different times from each other. These periods were the moments when the feminist movement differed from each other to a certain extent, both in terms of its demands and the problems it highlighted. Therefore, it tries to see the differences in the way in which the reactions of the female characters of these three works against traditional gender roles are handled by three different authors from three different periods in literary world.

As for the problematics addressed in this thesis, the first one is whether Kate Millett's concepts of *Sexual Politics* and *Sexual Revolution* draw a useful conceptual-analytic framework when analyzing women characters and feminist literature. Another important problem is the extent to which the periodic variations seen in the demands and complaints of the feminist movement, in parallel with the three different works, are

reflected in the narratives of these works. To what extent do the ways in which the female characters, who are left helpless in the traditional family structure have similar problems in different periods, and to what extent do they reflect seasonal differences? The third important problematic is the questioning of the possibilities of expanding and enriching a critical approach that covers all periods, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) did, in the way of analyzing the works produced by different women writers in different periods in terms of feminist literature.

1.1 Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism is literary criticism shaped by feminist theory or, more broadly, feminist politics. It uses the principles and ideology of feminism to criticize the literary language. This school of thought aims to analyze and describe the ways in which literature portrays the narrative of male dominance by exploring the economic, social, political and psychological forces embedded within literature. It can be said that such thinking and criticism of works changes the way literary texts are viewed and studied, and also changes the content of what is commonly taught. Greek myths are also widely used in these texts (Plain & Sellers, 2007).

symbolism of female authors so that it is not lost or overlooked by the male point of view, and resisting the inherent sexism. In other words, it sets alternative goals that center women against mainstream literature. Among these goals are to analyze women writers and their texts from a woman's point of view, and to raise awareness of the sexual politics of language and style. These goals, which have been developed for many years, were systematized by Lisa Tuttle in the 1980s and have been adopted by the majority of feminist critics since then. (Tuttle, 1986, p. 184).

The history of feminist literary criticism extends from the classic works of nineteenth-century women writers such as George Eliot and Margaret Fuller to the contemporary theoretic works of "third wave" writers in women's studies and gender studies. Before the 1970s, that is in the first and second waves of feminism, feminist literary criticism was concerned with women's authorship and the representation of women's condition in literature. In particular, it focused on the portrayal of fictional female characters. In addition, feminist literary criticism deals with the exclusion of women from the classical literary world. In this context theorists

such as Lois Tyson put finger on the fact that people do not generally accept the views of women writers as universal (Tyson, 2006, p. 107-108).

Since the development of more complex concepts of gender and subjectivity and third-wave feminism, feminist literary criticism has followed new and varied paths that can be incorporated into the Frankfurt School's tradition of critical theory, which analyzes how a subject's dominant ideology affects society. In addition, the school considered gender as a concrete political element and as a part of the existing power relations that can be deconstructed in terms of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Barry, 2002). Traditional feminism, which focuses on women's representation and participation in politics, also continued to play an active role in this process. More precisely, modern feminist criticism seeks to identify the deliberate and unintentional patriarchal conditioning perceived within the basic structures of society, including education, politics, and working life.

Susan Lanser suggested renaming feminist literary criticism "critical literary feminism" to shift the focus from criticism to feminism, and noted that writing such works requires a "political context awareness" (Lanser, 1991). Similarly, Elaine Showalter became one of the leading critics of the gynocritic method with her 1977 work *A Literature of Their Own*. To this date, scholars have been concerned not only with delineating oppression narratives, but also with creating a literary space for the past, present, and future. Knowledgeable figures of women's literature also sought to reflect their experiences in a way that was appreciated by literary works and not excluded as part of reality.

In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic*, an analysis of women's poetry and prose and how it fits into the broader feminist literary canon. This publication formed the basis of feminist criticism and expanded the scope of publications that were considered feminist works, especially in the 19th century. In particular, the book argued that women were largely judged by men in the academy into two separate categories: monsters or angels. Gilbert and Gubar argued that being confined to these categories led women writers to certain areas of literature and literary production, allocating the rest to men only, and causing a marked anxiety in women writers especially about staying within these categories or being ridiculed (Gilbert & Gubar, 2006, p. 45-92). Gilbert and Gubar's particular focus on literary criticism in the field of poetry and other short works has expanded the possibilities for feminist literary contributions today, as they were previously seen as less valid than longer works.

Today, writers like Gloria E. Anzaldúa have succeeded in contributing to the feminist canon, despite working with typefaces other than full-size novels.

In the 1980s, Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, bell hooks, Nellie McKay, Valerie Smith, Hortense Spillers, Eleanor Traylor, Cheryl Wall and Sheryl Ann Williams made great contributions to the Black Feminist movement of the period. Around the same time, Deborah E. McDowell published *New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism*, which calls for a more theoretical school of criticism against existing writings that she finds very practical. In this essay, McDowell also extensively discussed the portrayal of black women in literature and how it is viewed more negatively than the depiction of white women. As time progressed, theory began to dissolve into ideology.

1.2 First Wave Feminism

First wave feminism can be summarized as the period of feminist activity and thought that took place in the West in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century. This feminist movement still focuses on gender equality from a predominantly legal and political perspective (Tong, 2018). In other words, first wave feminism can be characterized as a movement predominantly focused on legal and political matters.

The term first-wave feminism was coined by journalist Martha Lear in her essay titled "Second Feminist Wave: What Do These Women Want?" published in *The New York Times Magazine* in March 1968 (Lear, 1968). First-wave feminism is characterized as focusing on the struggle for women's political power, as opposed to de facto informal inequalities. Although the wave metaphor is well-established, including in academic literature, it has been criticized for creating a narrow view of women's liberation that puts activism in the background and focuses on specific visible actors (Hewitt, 2010, p. 1-12). To sum up the highly political aspect of the first wave feminism stems from its goal to provide equal voting and legal rights for women. Therefore, it brings forward political activism, legal struggles for equal recognition, political opposition on an institutional level and strategic alliances with other progressive forces in the society.

1.3 Second Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism was a period of nearly two decades of feminist activity that began in the early 1960s and extended into the third wave of feminism in the early 1990s. The most important factor of the second wave feminism in the context of this study is the internalization of male-dominated values. Discussions about how women

internalize patriarchy has a very important place in this literature for understanding the ways in which dominant social norms and expectations influenced women's behaviours and mindsets. To this end, second wave feminists underlined the socialization process in which girls were taught to be submissive persons who should prioritize their roles as good mothers and wives. These feminists analyzed social institutions like education system, media and family as significant superstructures shaping women's self understandings and demeanors (Gordon, 2013).

Particularly Betty Friedan's significant work titled *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) gives important clues for this phenomenon. Focusing on suburban and middle-class women's unhappiness, Friedan links the internalization of male-dominated norms among women and their problems. In this way it is important for understanding dilemmas that the characters from two stories and the novel experience. After Friedan conducted interviews with unhappy suburban women she found that they internalized patriarchal values and accepted their traditional roles. Their belief in their primary purpose as the servants of family causes internal conflicts with their desires, expectations and aspirations (Friedan, 1963).

As it can be seen while focusing on Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (2000) second wave feminists emphasized the necessity to recognize and challenge this internalization among women. The most important contribution of these feminists including Millett is the questioning of traditional gender roles, advocating for equal rights and empowering women to break the chains of patriarchal norms and institutions.

A general criticism of the second wave was that it ignored differences in women and did not take into account, for example, how a black woman would experience sexism differently than a white woman. (Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 56-91). Writers like Audre Lorde have critically addressed how attempts to homogenize "sisterhood" neglect all factors of one's identity, such as race, sexuality, age, and class (Lorde, 2000, p. 288-293).

The second-wave feminist movement in the United States was criticized for not accepting the struggles of women of color, and their voices were often silenced or ignored by white feminists. Dominant historical narratives of the feminist movement has been focusing on white, East Coast, and predominantly middle-class women and women's consciousness-raising groups, excluding the experiences and contributions of

lesbians, women of color, and working-class and lower-class women (Douglas, 1990). Chela Sandoval called the dominant narratives of the women's liberation movement "hegemonic feminism". According to her, this feminist historiography was based on a special population of women who assumed that all women experienced the same oppression as white and predominantly middle-class women (Blackwell, 2011, p. 16).

From the early 1960s to the early 1980s, feminist scholars reexamined various writings, oral histories, works of art, and works by women of color, working-class women and lesbians. Decentralizing what they saw as the dominant historical narratives of the second wave of the women's liberation movement, allowed them to expand and transform the historical understanding of feminist consciousness (Douglas, 1990). These scholars claim to create what Maylei Blackwell calls "enhanced memory" by rescuing pasts that they believe have been erased and overlooked. Blackwell describes it as a form of "counter-memory" that creates space for women's feminist consciousness within a transformative and fluid "alternative archive" and "hegemonic narratives". For Blackwell, looking at the gaps and rifts of the second wave is to open into question existing dominant histories that claim to represent a universal, allowing fragments of historical knowledge and memory to be discovered and new perspectives on the past to emerge alongside new historical feminist issues. The feminist experience should be decentralized and open to the differences within (Blackwell, 2011, p. 101).

As can be seen below, it is not possible to talk about hierarchies of femininity, as there are no colored female characters in the works discussed in this study. However, the transformation of second wave feminism into a hegemonic feminism has led to the emergence of a single woman narrative and a single emancipation method (emancipation from the patriarchal family structure). In order to question the existence of the experience of constructing an alternative narrative, it would be useful to consider the criticisms regarding second-wave feminism and third-wave feminism. It is also important in terms of evaluating the situations in which the relations between women and power are not only in the form of a confined-confiner relationship, where characters such as mothers, sisters and servants of men can enter not only in the relationship of exploitation, but also in the relationship of accomplice/collaborator in the context of the reproduction of the male-dominated order.

1.4 Third Wave Feminism

Third wave feminism is a feminist movement that started in the early 1990s (Evans, 2015, p. 22). Building on the second wave's advances in civil rights, third-wave feminists, born in the 1960s and 1970s, embraced diversity and individualism in women. They tried to redefine what it means to be a feminist (Evans, 2015) (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). The third wave witnessed the emergence of new feminist movements and theories such as intersectionality, gender positivity, vegetarian ecofeminism, transfeminism and postmodern feminism. According to feminist scholar Elizabeth Evans, "confusion about what constitutes third-wave feminism was in some ways its defining feature" (Walker, 1992).

The third wave traces back to the emergence of the rebel grrrl feminist punk subculture in Olympia, Washington, in the early 1990s, and the 1991 televised testimony of Anita Hill (to an all-male, all-white Senate Judiciary Committee). African-American judge Clarence Thomas was asked to testify in the case in which he sexually assaulted her. The term third wave is attributed to Rebecca Walker, who responded to Thomas' appointment to the Supreme Court with an article in Ladies magazine entitled "Being the Third Wave" (Walker, 1992). Walker argued that third-wave feminism is not just a reaction, but a movement in itself. Because according to her, there was more work ahead of the feminist cause. In a similar vein, it is worth mentioning alternative feminist movements such as Chicana feminism. In the 1960s and 1970s Chicana feminism was organized mostly by and for Mexican American women. However, Chicana feminists emphasized that the necessity to connect issues of gender with liberatory aims of feminist movement. They also renounced the mainstream second-wave feminism for its inability to include racism and classism in their political emancipatory projects. They underlined the different needs, demands and concerns of women from different communities (West, 2014, p. 247-68).

Another important contribution of third wave feminism is the term intersectionality coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to explain that women live in "layers of oppression", e.g. from gender, race, and class, and the concept developed during the third wave (Evans, 2015). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as feminists organized online and reached a global audience through blogs and e-journals, they broadened their goals by focusing on breaking down gender role stereotypes and expanding feminism to include women of different racial and cultural identities (Tong, 2000). 2019, p. 284-285).

At this point it is necessary to emphasize the creative activities and women's expression of their experiences. Since the expansion and enrichment of feminist thought, experiences and criticism it is necessary for women to express themselves by act of writing and with other creative endeavors. Even though it was published in 1976 and could be seen as a part of second wave feminism, the foundational essay in feminist literary theory titled "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Helene Cixous laid the foundation of a significant critical point put forward by third wave feminists in terms of the acknowledgment of female experiences. Cixous, in her article, deals with the idea of women's writing and the importance of women finding their own voices in literature. For Cixous the development of a unique style of writing is very important to include different narratives and experiences as well as to enrich women's literature and literature in general. It can encourage women to write as a form of exploration because she believes that this act can be a means of expressing their fantasies, desires and hidden truths. In this sense women's bodies, sensuality and writing have a strong connection between themselves. A rich and authentic kind of writing could emerge as the result of works written by women who take their inspiration from their own bodily experiences (Cixous, 1976).

The most obvious criticism that critics brought to this new movement was the lack of a single case for third-wave feminism, hence the lack of cohesion. The first wave fought for women's suffrage and won legal rights for them. The second wave fought for women's right to equal opportunities in the workforce and for an end to legal gender discrimination. The third wave is claimed to have no consistent purpose and is often seen as an extension of the second wave (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004).

With the previous subsection, critiques of second-wave feminism, the contributions of third-wave feminism may seem irrelevant at first glance. However, as stated at the beginning, the writing dates of the works discussed correspond to important breaking moments in feminist thought. In turn, this leads us to question whether there are certain differences and similarities in the confined situation of female characters and their reactions to this situation. In addition, the concepts of alternative memories and intersectionality, that is, the intertwining of different forms of oppression and closure, and the fact that they can be transferred to the future in different ways may be important for this study (rather than the feminism of black and colored women).

1.5 Kate Millett and Her *Sexual Politics*

Millett was a leading figure in the women's movement or second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (Genzlinger, 2017). For example, she and Sidney Abbott, Phyllis Birkby, Alma Routsong, and Artemis March were among the members of CR One, the first lesbian-feminist awareness group. Millett, however, identified as bisexual in late 1970 (Buchanan, 2011, p. 39). In 1966 Millett became a committee member of the National Organization of Women and subsequently joined the New York Radical Women, Radical lesbians, and City Center Radical Women organizations (Rosenberg, 2013, p. 225). After the success of her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), she was subjected to criticism who found it arrogant and elitist, and she discussed her problems in her 1974 book *Flying* (Magill, 2014, p. 2536-2537).

Millett was one of the first authors to define the modern concept of patriarchy as the society-wide subjugation of women (Green, 2013, p. 285). "Millett articulated a theory of patriarchy and conceptualized women's gender and sexual oppression in terms that demanded a gender role revolution with radical changes in personal and family lifestyles," wrote her biographer Gayle Graham Yates. She was in a different place from feminists who aimed to develop opportunities for social and political leadership and economic independence for women (Wintle, 2008, p. 532).

Briefly in *Sexual Politics*, Millett argues that "sexuality has an often neglected political aspect" (Millett, 2000, p. xix) and continues to discuss the role that patriarchy plays in sexual relations (Millet, 2000, p. 29-280). It particularly looks at the works of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer (Millett, 2000, p. 294-335). Millett argues that these writers view and discuss gender in a patriarchal and sexist way. In contrast, she appreciates the more nuanced gender politics of gay writer Jean Genet (Millett, 2000). Other authors discussed at length include Sigmund Freud, George Meredith, John Ruskin, and John Stuart Mill (Millett, 2000, p. 89-147).

1.6 Main Concepts and Arguments in Sexual Politics

Sexual Politics has proposed an important analysis method and thought system that constitutes the source of the women's movement that it defines and inspires. Kate Millett expressed a very new view at the time when she said these: "Sex is at the root of all our problems, and if we don't destroy this worst of our oppressive systems; If we don't get to the root of sexual politics and the morbid delusion of power and violence associated with it, our struggle for liberation will lead us back to the same primitive anxieties" (Millett,

2000).

According to Millett's analysis and the approach of the women's movement that followed her, sexuality is shaped and directed not naturally but by social influence. This is not a biological impulse, but a relationship created in the social sphere. Social roles, sexist behaviors and sexual scenarios create and produce the sexual hegemony of men over women and other men. In Millett's critique of Freud, she says that masculinity and femininity are not due to the natural nature of the person or biological necessity, and she makes the following determination: "Both sexes are determined by the behavior patterns that are developed gracefully within the society, are strictly based on the cultural structure, and constantly undergo intercultural change" (Millett , 2000). These forms of behavior achieve compliance with social norms based on the widespread but mistaken belief that the difference arises from male and female anatomy. Gender roles create the patriarchal character, which has become a way of thinking and a way of life. This "acceptance" of women and powerless men is achieved by the ideological conditioning of individuals through socialization.

In *Sexual Politics*, Millett supports the view that male dominance maintains its hegemony over women throughout society, despite changes within the family and in family types. She saw the adaptation of male dominance to changing conditions as one of the conditions for reproduction. In the light of this view, male-dominated sexuality, which is the engine of male hegemony, is largely an autonomous power independent of the family, the driving force of male domination's ability to adapt itself to a wide variety of institutional forms. In the following stories, although the conditions, historical periods and social patterns of women are different, the fact that they reflect a certain alienation with their madness in the face of male-dominated sexuality is considered within the framework of this theoretical conceptualization, an important contribution will be made to feminist literary readings with Millett's methods.

2. RESULTS

The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Susan Rawlings in *To Room Nineteen*, and Iris Chase Griffen in *The Blind Assassin* have in common that they are silent women who accept their circumstances despite their discomfort and discontent. They are the characters who hide their helplessness and suffering and make us, the readers, feel them

without expressing their inner turmoils directly. As will be emphasized again, they are not radical feminists or women who want their own autonomy and space for creation. In these works, it is possible to find traces of the subjects that feminist thought focused on at the time they were written. The reason for the examination of the subjects on which different feminist waves are focused above is due to this quality of the works. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* was published as a short story in 1892, at a time when the first-wave feminist movement was gaining momentum. The aim of women to have the same and equal legal status as men and to obtain economic and political rights had an important place in this period. Doris Lessing's story *To Room Nineteen* coincided with the rise of the second-wave feminist movement in 1963. Even though they had legal and political rights, it bears the traces of the period when the status of women without a name in the family and society was opened to question. Finally, Margaret Atwood wrote *The Blind Assassin* at a time when previous periods were subjected to intense criticism with third wave feminism, the feminist movement became pluralistic within itself and tried to write its own history objectively and in an anti-hierarchical way.

2.1 Women In Alienation and Isolation: The Yellow Wallpaper and To Room Nineteen

As mentioned before, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is mostly evaluated in readings related to the status of women in the 19th century Western world. It is also read as a reaction to the role of middle class woman emphasized as the “angel of the house” and the limitations of her rights in this role. Similarly, Doris Lessing's *To Room Nineteen* is a story that conveys the alienation brought about by the middle class woman's position in her domestic life and her status. Both female characters were crushed under the ideal of “true” womanhood and when they were unable to sustain it, they suffered a great mental destruction. The axis of the struggle that defines two wives and mothers is the ideology of “real womanhood” that dominates family life and pervades all kinds of relations between two sexes.

Their problem is not just whether or not they have a room and life of their own. All female characters in these works we have discussed have this environment. In fact, in the second work, *To Room Nineteen*, there is an alternative room where our heroine can take time for herself (the hotel room she hires). The problem is that the forces

beyond their control draw the boundaries of their lives, namely the dominant position of males in patriarchal family structure. Because, as can be seen in both stories (and later in Atwood's novel), none of them will realize with horror that they do not have an autonomous life in this environment. As a result, going crazy and suicide will be an escape from this ideal of femininity as well as their alienated life as gendered subjects of this family structure.

If we start with *The Yellow Wallpaper*, first important point of the story is the situation that its author Gilman also experiences: the situation of being confined against her will. Moreover, her only pathology is to be a woman, that is, to be hysterical. She is defined as a patient to be treated by her husband, although she does not have any other concrete pathology. *The Yellow Wallpaper* consists of twelve separate narratives similar to diary entries. The common ground of all of these narratives is that the character covers the three-month treatment period. The narrative has the reader witness the character slowly going mad in isolation.

This change is conveyed to us through the transformation of the relationship between character and the yellow wallpaper that gives the story its name and adorns walls of her room. At first, the narrator does not like the wallpaper at all. But then she “gets really fond of the room in spite of the wall-paper”. “There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will” (Gilman, 1892). As can be understood from this sentence, her relationship with the yellow wallpaper becomes a component of a process that differentiates the identity of the woman and enables her to find her own voice in her deteriorating mental state.

In fact, it can be said that it has transformed into an alternative reality of the narrator. There she sees an entrapped and silent woman like herself. It is even possible to say that she recovered as a result of her obsession with the female figure on that wallpaper. It is also evident that it gives her vitality in this following sentence: “You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch” (Gilman, 1892). Actually both the narrator and the imaginary woman in the wallpaper are imprisoned beings and they have no political or legal rights. The narrator’s husband is the ultimate decision-maker here. As Millett indicates above, the male-dominated family structure gives no opportunity to the narrator to make her own decisions. Her dysfunction as a wife and mother due to her depression deprives her of even minimal advantages her husband gives her in a middle-class household. At some point, the narrator does not want to

leave the room. In other words, she does not want to return to the world that alienated her. Before she can solve the mystery of the woman imprisoned in the wallpaper, she fears that her husband will take the room where she was locked up. By the end of the story, the narrator has become almost completely identified with that woman she discovered there.

One of the important aspects of the story, and the phenomenon that will be more prominent especially in *To Room Nineteen*, is that the place of the woman in the family can be filled with another woman. When the middle-class woman loses her mental and physical capacities, and is no longer able to fulfil her duties in the family (taking care of husband and children), an alternative woman (a maid, sister, husband's sister or mistress) can easily be found to take her place. Also in Gilman's story, the narrator's domestic duties, such as taking care of her child, are transferred to her husband's sister. In terms of Millett's analysis on sexual politics, this female character indicates another level of internalization of male-dominated values. Politically this sister reproduces the dominant role of males in the family and as a woman she could take on domestic responsibilities when the narrator loses her functions.

The last part of the story, the moment the narrator leaves the room, comes with an important paradigm shift in terms of the form of work. The story that has been told in the first person through narrator until that moment suddenly begins to be told in the third person narration. We also learn the name of the narrator for the first time after this radical transition (that is, she finally has a name along with an identity). She pulls out her husband's sister, who came to take her out, and locks herself inside so that the woman in the wallpaper can't escape. By owning the room, the transformation between the figure on wallpaper and herself is completed. Her exclaim, "I've got out at last" when her husband arrives is an expression of liberation. The passage in which her name is conveyed to us reflects this transformation to the reader in a very radical way, for she is no longer John's wife. Her empowerment, in a sense, is a result of the rejection of her role in this family structure, as Millett would propose in *Sexual Politics*.

The narrator is the one who she was before she escaped from that wallpaper. She is a woman who has internalized her husband's standards and values, her duties and roles at home, and has adapted to all of them. She is the woman who chose to remain silent by recording her thoughts and feelings in her diaries. It is the woman trapped inside wallpapers in the room where she is closed. But this process of confinement and

insanity allows her to get rid of her husband's control and his sister Jennie, who is imposing her husband's rules. But her fight for salvation almost brings her closer to suicide:

In one point of the story, she got angry enough to do something desperate. She contemplates on jumping the window but bars of windows make her deter from this action. Interestingly the real reason that makes her to dissuade from the suicide is the improper nature of this action and the fact that it could be misconstrued. Also outside, there are lots of creeping women and in a sense she tries to find and solve her own problem by reflection on the woman in the wallpaper (Gilman, 1892).

In other words the political structure of her domestic life makes her incompatible at some point even though she internalizes its values and responsibilities. The entrapment symbolized by the yellow wallpaper and the imaginary woman our narrator finds there open the way to break with this political sexual structure of her family. Even though the story has no links with voting or political rights, it is evident that the narrator has no legal and political rights, and this determines her life and aggravates her condition. She has no legal and political rights to use against her confinement.

As to the story *To Room Nineteen*, it is necessary to underline an important difference and similarity between itself and Gilman's story: Its heroine is a woman who has certain economic and political rights due to the historical period of the story. This also expands her choices to deal with the problem she is experiencing (such as renting a hotel room, hiring a maid). Because she is not a woman who is locked in a room against her will, like Gilman's character. However, this does not prevent her husband from making certain diagnoses (such as "not being rational") about her.

As a matter of fact, the protagonist of this story, Susan Rawlings, is a character who is alienated by the unequal gender relations within her family. This adds a different meaning to the important similarity between two stories. Susan discovers that her "indispensable" role as a wife and mother is ultimately dispensable. It shows the political character of family life because the most important aspect of this domestic structure is the responsibilities and functions of women. When they cannot fulfill them, it is possible to find another woman for them. In this case the housekeeper and the caretaker assumes these roles.

One of the similarities and differences between two stories concerns the first-person narration. Lessing's story is also narrated in first-person narration, but unlike Gilman's story, this person is not our hero. It is as if a free-observing God-writer who tells us every detail of Susan Rawlings' life. The narrator, who presents us the anatomy of a marriage, conveys Rawlings' depression and madness step by step. This anatomy also reflects the unequal and problematic structure of male-dominated family life this middle-class couple live. Lessing analyses the inner life of middle-class marriages through this narrator. The story starts out like a fairy tale. It introduces us to the Rawlings, who had a perfect life and a perfect marriage in the 50s. Children, suburban homes, appliances in the house, everything is perfect. However, the phrase "and yet" is the beginning of the emptiness, meaninglessness and contradictions in this family, to be conveyed to the reader step by step.

Susan Rawlings' confrontation with the emptiness of her married life turns into an effort to discover herself before marriage. In a way she tries to interpret her life except her marriage and its responsibilities. For the first time, she feels that the life she is living is not really her life. She's just devoted to her family and ideal feminine roles: "I signed myself over, so to speak, to other people. To the children. Not for one moment in 12 years have I been alone, had time to myself. So now I have to learn to be myself again" (Lessing, 1994). This self-awareness initially gives the story an optimistic tone. With this questioning, Susan started a quest to find her own voice. In this regard it is possible to say Susan starts to follow the solution Millett offers in her work, namely breaking with patriarchal family life and focusing on women's own feelings, aspirations and desires. In this case it starts with Susan's quest to find herself outside her family life.

As a result of her effort, Susan discovers that she is replaceable and dispensable. To alleviate her domestic duties, she takes home a caretaker named Sophie Traub. Sophie is perfectly aware of the role she must play. Sophie gets along very well with kids and the housekeeper and gradually takes Susan's place. This gradual process has also a political character because it gives the reproductive functions of family life to another women and makes her more valuable than the dysfunctional woman. The first one aggravates the problematic nature of the latter. Also at the end it reproduces the power of man in the family since he does not share these responsibilities on an equal basis. This situation also reflects the reproductive role of women in patriarchal family life as

Kate Millett highlights in her work. Women has a gendered role in family life and when women do not fulfil this important role, another woman or women might get involved. Discovering that she can be replaceable as a result of her willful effort, Susan Rawlings, unlike the narrator in Gilman's story, is aware that she is going under a very severe depression and consciously observes the progress of her depression. She begins to look for a way to save herself in a place where she can be the 'real' Susan, where there are no children, no husband and no household chores. On the one hand, she questions her life before getting married and having children. She rents a hotel room in London. She goes there five days a week and just sits and spends time alone. Room 19, where she stays for a few hours, becomes where she isolates herself. There she does "nothing at all". The following sentence very strikingly sums up the emptiness she falls into when she isolates herself from her family life and roles: "I'm just the same. Yes, here I am, and if I never saw any of my family again, here I would still be ... how very strange that is!" (Lessing, 1994). To summarize, these two stories provide us important insights that highlight Kate Millett's analysis of sexual politics in patriarchal family life. Both characters have had problems in reconciling with their duties and roles in this family order. They were shaken to see that they could be replaced even if they were not rebellious and revolutionary characters, and to witness that they were discredited when they could not fulfill their roles mentally or emotionally. It is striking in this respect that their husbands play the role of "diagnosing," "commenting about their character," shutting them down. Their dominance in the family is reinforced to some extent by caregivers, sisters, and other women. However, it is true that there are certain differences in terms of the periods in which these two stories were written. In the first, it is quite evident that women are deprived of certain fundamental rights. In the second, the problem is experienced on a more sociological and domestic level. But there is a very serious parallel ground in both. And this is the destructive, alienating and isolating effect of the patriarchal family sphere on women who are trying to cope with it. At this point, it is necessary to keep in mind Gilbert and Gubar's analysis (2006). Gilbert and Gubar have claimed that female writers projected their rebellious and questioning attitudes onto their heroines. However, they state that the image of mad or monstrous woman somehow expresses their inner divisions in their desire to accept and reject the patriarchal society. In other words, this mad woman image in feminist literature was not the antithesis of heroic protagonist, but rather the expression of the anxieties and

angers growing within their authors. Considering that Gilman recounts what happened to her as a feminist writer with *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Lessing wrote her story at a time when traditional family life in the West was questioned, it is quite possible to say that her characters reflect a certain sexual and political preference.

2.2 Woman's Entrapment in Retrospect: The Blind Assassin

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* takes place between the first and second world wars in terms of time span of the narrative. However, as a work published in 2000, it is possible to say that it looks at the events and status of women in the past with a historical and retrospective eye. Although three fictions intertwined throughout the book complicate some observations, it can be said that in essence, two sisters convey the oppression and alienation processes they experience in the male-dominated world. Again, in this intertwined story, which includes middle-class women, the phenomena of alienation, depression, patriarchal family life and its oppression on women (both physically and psychologically) appear in different ways. In addition, the journey of its protagonist, Iris, provides an interesting comparison with the two stories discussed above.

The book mainly consists of a science-fiction work called "The Blind Assassin" and memories of Iris, later on, including the events that Iris relates with her sister Laura's diaries. Since parts of this work are quoted from place to place in the book, it is essential to state its importance in terms of analysis. The science-fiction work is published with Laura's name and takes place in a fictional city named Sakiel-Norn. This work revolves around an illicit love affair between an unnamed blind assassin and a nameless woman. They are only referred to as the "Blind Assassin" and the "Woman." Blind Assassin is a storyteller who recounts his tales to the Woman. He tells her a science fiction story set on the planet Zycron, where a group of rebels is fighting against an oppressive regime. Since the domination of this oppressive regime over women is so emphasized, it can be said that it brings to mind Kate Millett's analysis of the counter-revolutionary period in the interwar period. In addition, the insinuations that Blind Assassin is related to a communist youth, Iris' lover, seem to be a reference to the radical and revolutionary elements who were fighting against fascism in this period. Besides both this dystopian work and the novel itself is the way of expression for Iris' reckoning with the past, herself, her internalized values and patriarchal family life.

Since these elements will be examined in the passages taken from *The Blind Assassin* below, it is also useful to keep the events connected to the chronological process of the novel. Iris and Laura Chase are middle-class sisters whose father owns Chase and Sons Factory. They lost their mother when they were young and their caregiver is the housekeeper Reenie. When their mother dies, the responsibility of the house and the girls falls entirely on Reenie. But Reenie isn't the only one taking on traditional feminine roles. The older sister Iris started to take on the roles that the traditional family assigned to women at an early age. She always has to take care of her little sister, Laura. In the narrative in which she recounts her memories, Iris does not fail to hint to the reader how emotionally draining it is.

In a sense, it can be stated that the responsibilities she assumed with the loss of her mother at a young age and the emotional burden it brought gained a quality that made Iris question her life and push her to seek an identity. Although her younger sister Laura is more fragile, she grows more freely with the protection provided by her sister and becomes a person who behaves according to her emotions. Iris is always more mature. The biggest reason is the responsibilities that fall on her after her mother's death. Another reason is her marriage with a someone fifteen years older than her due to work-related needs of her father.

Although Iris' relationship with her father is very limited, Iris tells us about her father's effort to teach her about family business. For the first time, Iris realizes the limited space in which not being a man has placed her while her father tries to involve her in the business world. After the first wave of the feminist movement, women gained certain economic and representational rights, but they were again confined to their traditional areas, as their being in business life was not welcomed socially. This situation is clearly summarized in the following passage: "At one point, after the death of their mother, the father decides to teach her the family business only when she is about ten years old, and later makes her go to the company every day, where she is exposed to the sullen stares of the company workers. Needless to say, both attempts fail bitterly. Knowing that she can never satisfy her father's standards, since she will not miraculously wake up as a boy one day, Iris is crushed." It is also important in the sense that woman cannot assume roles exclusively belonged to the man and they are bound to entrapped in their gendered roles in this family structure.

A crucial point existing in Gilman's story is also here as well. The villain of novel and the man Iris got married to is not alone in the reproduction of his dominance. Richard's sister Winifred is at least as ruthless and malicious as her brother. In fact, Winifred is someone who guides and mentors her brother Richard on many issues. Richard consults Winifred about everything "because she was the one who sympathized with him, propped him up, encouraged him generally" (Atwood, 2001, p. 352). This reveals the sexual political sphere that presents women who benefit from the continuity of patriarchal policies within the family, not as independent women, but as women who reproduce the male-dominated structure. As a matter of fact, the political personality of Richard and the fact that Winifred, not his wife, Iris, contributed to the production of this personality is clearly seen in the following lines. It also exemplifies Millett's conceptualization of the continuity of sexual politics.

Before Iris, Winifred assumes the reproduction of the family structure as a sister. As Atwood describes her (through Iris' words) Winifred is the one who prepares her brother and promotes his interests. In every decision he made Winifred is the most significant person who whispers cues and suggestions for him. Richard is "the man of the future and the woman standing behind him" (as every successful man has one) is Winifred. After marriage Winifred does not give this status to her brother's wife Iris. As the extension of patriarchal family structure, Winifred is an important reason for Iris' depression and alienation because she is also replaceable as Gilman and Lessing's characters: "She was necessary to Richard, I on the other hand could always be replaced. My job was to open my legs and shut my mouth." This last sentence refers to her reduced role as sexual and trivial object of male dominated sexual politics and its basic unit, family as Millett always indicates (Atwood, 2001, p. 353).

Another factor that turns the sacrifice made by Iris into a tragedy is that she sees marriage as a salvation from the conditions she is in, but is trapped in a much more terrible relationship. As literary critic Donna Heiland indicates, "it leads to an even grimmer form of entrapment than they knew before. The marriage destroys Chase industries entirely, and nearly destroys not just one but both sisters as well" (Heiland, 2004, p. 167). Trapped in a terrible marriage and unable to save her father's job, Iris's only solace is that she has offered her sister Laura a home. However, later developments will cause Laura to suffer a great disaster as a result of this marriage.

At this point, Heiland's notes on Laura will be useful for our analysis. Comparing Laura with Iris is important in terms of making sense of the impacts of their tragedy. It was mentioned that Laura was brought up more freely than Iris. But Laura was different from her sister in other important ways: “She is seen as “different” primarily because of her unwillingness – maybe even inability – to engage in the double-talk of life ... Laura functions as an uncanny other to her sister and to Others as well, letting that which has been repressed rise to the surface, or, more accurately, never repressing anything at all” (Heiland, 2004, p. 166).

The difference between two sisters is seen most clearly when Laura proposes to her the night before Iris's marriage to run away and get rid of her burden. Iris rejects Laura's proposal, but in this refusal, besides her love for Laura, there is also her discomfort with her. Because Laura's perception of the world and her honesty and the way she expresses her feelings and emotions are against the world to which Iris is attuned. Iris legitimizes her cowardice and meekness to herself under the guise of virtue and self-sacrifice. Laura's efforts to shake this perception arouse great anger in Iris. One dialogue between two sisters could be interpreted as two alternative reactions to male dominated world. While Iris prefers to be conform with it Laura chooses to be outside of this world yet she sees Iris' choice as a passive obedience or unconscious existence where Iris says “Leave me alone, I've got my eyes open” and she responds as “like a sleepwalker” (Atwood, 2001, p. 253).

But a great tragedy causes Iris to free herself from this ideal womanhood: Laura's rape and impregnation by her husband Richard, Laura's confinement to an institution and forced abortion, and ultimately her suicide. The event that triggers Laura's suicide is the news of the death of her beloved communist writer (who is also the inspiration for the Blind Assassin persona) Alex Thomas.

The male-dominated world that hurt Laura and Iris is at home. Intimidated by threats from the outside world throughout their childhood, and taking advice from their caregivers, Rennie, against outside rapists and bad boys, the girls are eventually subjected to rape and oppression in their own homes. This shows how the ideal family life put before the chaste woman actually, as Millett states, how a systematic social pressure is institutionalized on women. It is Richard who harms them, driving Laura into madness and destruction, and imprisoning Iris in a meaningless life.

After Richard gets Laura pregnant, he puts her in a mental institution. He legitimizes this decision by citing her characteristics and citing the severe depression she experienced after systematic rapes. His sister Winifred is also involved in this plan, and one of their aims is to have Laura an abortion at this institute. Laura, who is not a compatible person like Iris, is shown as a crazy woman. The fact that the head of the family closed her in a mental hospital is a motif that the patriarchal power uses a lot and is seen in other two stories. The way of the power that reproduces patriarchal sexual policies to deal with problematic women is to ignore and close them. First, this woman is shown as mentally disturbed. After diagnosis, a suitable place is found to turn it off and it is guaranteed that it will not be heard again. This power structure and the family life that it defines can only be maintained smoothly if such women are entrapped and isolated.

To sum up, Iris, in a way, survives this tragedy by writing and passing on her experiences as a historical narrative to new generations. The act of writing, as Cixous emphasizes above, is the way to explore herself as a means of expressing her desires, hidden truths and aspirations. For Iris it is first of all a critical reckoning with her past. Also it has a political function because it analyzes her own internalization of traditional values and the suffocating/alienating structure of male-dominated family life with its political structure desubjectifying women or in Winifred's case transforming them into the shadow and representative of male power. In a way, Iris also impartially conveys the role she plays in maintaining the patriarchal power structure. As Atwood stated in her interviews, it can be said that she takes into account the accumulating criticisms in the feminist movement with a "realistic" attitude rather than a "feminist" one. Because, in addition to the image of the woman (Laura) who went crazy and committed suicide, we witness a woman (Iris) who is both a victim and a part of this process, coming to terms with it and criticizing the process through writing.

3. DISCUSSION

This thesis attempts to analyze a common phenomenon observed in feminist literature in the conceptual perspective of Millett's sexual politics: the struggle to overcome isolation and alienation that women's confinement brings in the patriarchal social order has been one of the important themes of feminist literary criticism. In this quest, the pain, expectations and anxieties of women, who face the pressures of the male-dominated order, the meaninglessness of the norms they internalize, and the discrimination they suffer from a new perspective, are reflected in the female characters the female writers create. Historically, the course of this search also reflects the pressing problems that the feminist movement has focused on in its struggles and the transformations in the structure of these problems over time. Works written in different periods and describing women have expressed different concerns and expectations.

However, the norms imposed by the male-dominated family structure and patriarchal society continued to exert their pressure on the body, mind and life of woman, despite being stretched to a certain extent. This ensures certain continuity and discontinuity in the criticisms of women writers and their characters in literary works. In this sense, just as the historical transformations of the feminist movement in different waves provide the explanation of certain differences, the theoretical-conceptual contributions to feminist thought and literary criticism make it easier to follow these continuities. The theoretical approaches, concepts and analytical methods Millett propose shed light on our analysis in the present study and they are important examples of these contributions. As a sub-type of female characters who go out of the norm is a very powerful figure. Contrary to radical and revolutionary female characters, accepting existing norms, internalizing them, silently sacrificing or devoting themselves to the male-dominated order turns their spiritual-mental fractures into a more interesting read. As Gilbert and Gubar stated, this situation also gives important ideas about the moods of the women writers who created them in their historical, social and political planes. However, this study has primarily focused on Millett's analysis on sexual politics and uneven relations between sexes in traditional patriarchal family. Women characters' confinement and their struggles to overcome the desperation and alienation that brings have become the focal point of this study. Their effort to overcome this confinement are not the product of conscious choice and systematic practices. As a result of this mad, divergent or monstrous women figures could also gain prominence in these narratives but the

common ground in all of these stories is the patriarchal order and its pressures on women. Also the result of not being able to fulfill their roles and functions in the "sexual-political" plane that they have internalized is being confined, marginalized, and reduced to an out-of-norm cases with medical diagnoses. The way of internalization also comes to the forefront because in all of these narratives some other woman assumes the roles and responsibilities of domestic life when our protagonists become dysfunctional and this situation aggravates their alienation, confinement and political desubjectification.

4. CONCLUSION

In this study, when we look at analyses on the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Susan Rawlings in *To Room Nineteen*, and Iris-Laura sisters in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin*, it is seen that there are differences between periods and continuity between same periods as mentioned above. The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* lives in a time when women do not have legal and political rights yet. This situation is clearly seen in her institutionalization process. Even though the story itself does not revolve around women's struggle for suffrage and political rights it is partly relevant to first wave feminism since the narrator in the story does not have any legal rights regarding the decisions determining her physical and psychological well-being. Susan Rawlings in *To Room Nineteen* has these rights but is overwhelmed and alienated by the weight of her duties to sustain her family's life. Therefore, her problem has a more social content. Atwood's characters, on the other hand, sit between the other two stories as of the period of the novel, but in terms of its ending, it has a vision that overlaps with third-wave feminism.

This brings us to the important common grounds between them. These common features revolve around this issue: the sexual political sphere or patriarchal power structure that tries to shape, imprison and direct them.

In all of three narratives the internalization of male-dominated and patriarchal family values have an important place. Also the detrimental consequences of this internationalization on women could be seen easily in terms of those protagonists' alienation, confinement and depression. Yet the second way of this internalization is seen among male characters' sisters in two narratives and the caretaker in *To Room Nineteen*. Although the latter does not have a hierarchical and oppressive role it has a

common characteristics with the other two women, namely the reproduction of domestic and political unit of family life by fulfilling women's roles. In this regard all protagonists are dispensable and in very unequal relations in their family life in terms of their legal rights in the first story, alternative opportunities to fulfill their aspirations without domestic roles in the second story and the novel. Oppressive female characters are political extensions of male power and serve to keep women in this unequal and oppressive sexual political relationship. The alienation and depression that this family life creates lead our characters to find a way to break with this confinement, sometimes in self-defeating ways. Yet in the final narrative, *The Blind Assassin* the act of writing itself could become a way to preserve an alternative memory and express a feminine voice in a critical tone.

In this regard Kate Millett's reading of this family life and social whole as a political structure founded on inequalities between the sexes in her book *Sexual Politics* continues to provide important data for understanding the works written by women and the problems that female characters grapple with. In other words, it presents a universal set of concepts to make sense of the suffering, insanity, suicide and struggles of female characters. It has a special importance as it sees the source of the sexual revolution in the woman's effort to build herself against this structure.

To summarize, the analyzes above show that it is possible to address the common problems that women have experienced since the birth of the feminist movement, with a set of generally accepted concepts, despite their differences and historical changes. The middle class women who tries to stay within the norms but is pushed by the norms, provides important data to make sense of women's struggle and search for identity in social sciences as well as in literature. The thinkers whose concepts and theories are used here have provided rich resources in this respect. These and similar studies will provide important readings for the solution and overcoming of the patriarchal family structure and the pressures on women, which will be an important contribution for the future.

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