Unsettling Spaces & Walls that Whisper
The Gothic Realm of Domestic Noir in American and Arabic Short Stories

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Received: November 7, 2025 Accepted: February 3, 2026 Online Published: June 17, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n5p551 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n5p551

Abstract

This study is a comparative analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (19th-century America) and Alifa Rifaat's *My World of the Unknown* (20th-century rural Egypt) through the prism of *domestic noir*, a subgenre of psychological fiction in which the house or intimate spaces become the locus of terror. Domestic noir arises from a long-standing gothic tradition where familial discord engenders psychic rupture and physical torment, retaining relevance with contemporary literary discourse.

Despite their different chronotopes, Gilman's and Rifaat's stories examine female isolation at home and the negative impact of patriarchy. They do this by using key elements of domestic noir, including the unsettling mix of intimacy and threat, blurred lines between reality and illusion, and gaslighting that shakes one's sense of sanity. The stories feature immersive first-person female narrators and take place in peculiar, isolated homes, reflecting Gothic themes. These themes include mad women, unclear endings, and a sense of eerie dread. Gilman criticizes 19th-century medical and social restrictions, while Rifaat combines feminist critique with Egyptian mysticism. Both stories culminate in a symbolic dénouement invoking the leitmotif of the *doppelgänger*, manifested in supernatural female figures behind walls. Evoking Freud's *Unheimlich*, where the familiar becomes terrifying, both novels transform the domestic sphere into a locus of terror and subversive self-recognition, framed through gothic, feminist, narrative, and spatial theoretical lenses.

This study bridges Western and Arab literary traditions, extending the concept of domestic noir to articulate a transnational discourse of female experience and resistance.

Keywords: Alifa Rifaat, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Domestic Noir, Female Confinement, Gothic Literature, Cross-Cultural Feminist Writing

1. Introduction: Problem Statement and Significance of Study

This research is a comparative study of two canonical texts often regarded as prototypes of feminist and gothic traditions. Reconceptualizing the domestic sphere as a locus of horror, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and Alifa Rifaat's *My World of the Unknown* (1971) foreground the experience of female subjects facing gendered subjugation, psychic fragmentation and epistemic instability behind closed doors. Through psychologically immersive and symbolically charged narratives, both authors negotiate spatial confinement and patriarchal surveillance articulating female subjectivities. This study fills a critical gap in scholarship as it situates both works within the larger scope of the transhistorical and transcultural framework of domestic noir, looking at them not as separate texts but as manifestations of comparable stories of women enduring patriarchal authorities despite divergent backdrops. This comparison demonstrates the ability of domestic noir to encapsulate diverse experiences from different topographies and times, exhibiting convergent aesthetics of claustrophobia, grotesque settings, and blurred realities mixed with subversive female agency.

Drawing on feminist and Gothic criticism, narrative theory, and spatial discourse, this study argues that domestic noir functions as a critical modality for interrogating women's lived spatialities and affective entrapment within domestic architectures. Ultimately, by bridging these narratives across cultural and temporal contexts, the paper illuminates the transnational resonance of domestic noir as a feminist narrative formation that reconfigures the spatial and epistemic boundaries of gendered experience.

The authors' cultural and ideological contexts differ dramatically, rendering their literary parallels more striking. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-935), an American feminist and social reformer, emerged during the Progressive Era, advocating women's economic and social independence. She viewed the home as both a political institution and a site of female subjugation. Her nonfiction, including Women and Economics (1898), underpins her critique of patriarchal exclusivity. *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) responds to her postpartum depression and the "rest cure" prescribed by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, enforcing bed rest and intellectual abstention (Golden, 1992). Partially autofictional, the story dramatizes how domestic spaces, though presumably comforting, become arenas of psychological terror, where the husband, ostensibly the protector, functions as the source of confinement and emotional betrayal.

In contrast, Alifa Rifaat (1930-1996), an Egyptian writer, draws on conservative social and religious backdrops, portraying women's lives in rural communities. Despite familial discouragement, she resumed writing in her forties, publishing *Distant View of a Minaret* (1983),

which includes *My World of the Unknown*, acclaimed for depicting women's emotional and physical incarceration. Silenced by her father, coerced into early marriage, and forbidden to publish by her husband, Rifaat mirrored the repression of her heroines. El Miniawi (2013) recounts how Rifaat kept her promise of not writing for 15 years, "writing only in secret, locked in the bathroom" and then was published under a pseudonym (p. 404). Writing, therefore, becomes a taboo activity, rendering the household into a prison and text that witnesses women's endurance and resistance. By portraying traumatized protagonists as victims, survivors, and heroes, Riffat shows how suffering can turn into a narrative of resilience and heroism, helping others manage the impact of vicarious trauma (Le Rossignol & Harris, 2022).

Rifaat distanced herself from Western feminist frameworks; her fiction, grounded in Islamic values, probes gender roles and marital conventions reinforced by patriarchal readings of tradition. Denys Johnson-Davies (1987) notes that this sets her apart from contemporaries such as Leila Baalbaki, Ghada Samman, and Hanan Al-Shaykh, whose work is influenced by Western feminist ideologies. Charlotte Bruner (1993) describes North African women writers as: "significant interpreters of their own cultures and of women's place therein" (p. 151), distinguishing outspoken feminists like Nawal El Saadawi from perceptive yet quieter authors like Rifaat. Although Rifaat depicts Egyptian women's everyday struggles, she refrains from overtly condemning patriarchy and maintains Arabo-Islamic values central to her cultural identity, as Bruner (1993) argues.

Rifaat and Gilman present the domestic sphere as a crucible of terror and delirium, in which identity and defiance are forged. Both authors identify with their narrators as they transform their personal experiences outside the world of the text into literary explorations of confinement and psychological oppression. Reading their work side by side, bridges Western and Arab literary traditions, offering an original transnational perspective that extends domestic noir beyond traditional Western-centric framing.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Domestic Noir: Between the Western Gothic Tradition and Feminist Theory

Domestic noir is a subgenre of crime fiction and psychological thriller that many scholars present as a product of the late twentieth century, crediting Julia Crouch for coining the term. Domestic noir is a narrative mode that interrogates the horrors emerging from the presumably peaceful domestic setting, especially related to female suffering, repression, silencing, subjugation, and resistance. Crouch describes domestic noir as follows:

> In a nutshell, Domestic Noir takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants. (2013)

Even though critical attention was given to the genre in the early 2010s through authors like Gillian Flynn and Paula Hawkins, the roots of this genre are well-grounded in older gothic and psychological traditions. Focused on private spaces, emotional claustrophobia, surveillance, and gender power-struggles, domestic noir as a framework provides room for exploring women's experiences under patriarchal control that could haunt both their mental and domestic spaces. Domestic noir, at its core, presents homes as a locus of emotional claustrophobia, control-laden relationships, and characters with unraveling mental states, mixing reality with shadowy imagination. As Gill Plain (2014) observes, the genre exposes "the sinister realities that lurk behind closed doors" (p. 22). She also notes that domestic noir, with its "uniquely adaptable formula," is "capable of carrying a complex social and political agenda while still attracting a mass audience" (p. 5), affirming that the genre channels social criticism, particularly concerning women's oppression in domestic spaces. Sutton (2018) links domestic noir to gothic tales, considering it as "a development of the psychological thriller which has its roots in early Nineteenth-Century Gothic tales such as *Northanger Abbey*" (p. 42). Fletcher (2016) emphasizes that domestic noir "foregrounds women's experiences of entrapment in domestic environments and their attempts, often subversive, to escape or survive them" (p. 22), framing the private sphere as a site of oppression and subtle resistance.

Domestic noir, which is rooted in Gothic tradition, has been primarily associated with both: contemporary and Western contexts; however, its ideological and aesthetic conventions extend beyond cultural and historical borders as this study shows. Both Gilman and Rifaat draw on established Gothic tropes, including eerie settings, remote deserted houses, unreliable narrators, psychological disintegration, and ambiguous symbolic endings. Domestic spaces in their work emerge as a gendered penitentiary, confining women both physically and psychically. The house embodies the domestic noir characteristics that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1986) highlights: "the hidden, often horrific, aspects of domestic life (p. 23). In their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar argue that gothic tropes historically offered women writers "a vocabulary for their own anger and alienation," with the madwoman figure symbolizing resistance to patriarchal confinement (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979/2000, p. 85). This spatial destabilization of identity and agency recalls Kristeva notion of abjection, defined as: "what disturbs identity, system, order… [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), and aligns with Freud's *unheimlich*, or uncanny, where the familiar turns unsettling and estranging (Freud, 1919/2003).

Domestic horror has been a prevailing theme in earlier women's Gothic fiction. Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) presents Thornfield Hall as a site of terror with the torment and concealment of Bertha Mason. In Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Manderley is also haunted and claustrophobic. Similarly, Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962) presents the imprisonment of two sisters. In *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Eleanor's fragility is mirrored by the sentient house: "Hill House, not sane... stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within" (Jackson, 1959, p. 3). Within this framework, Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* explores a woman suffering, confined in a nursery due to her postpartum depression. Golden (1992) describes Gilman's story as a "critique of the ways in which

patriarchal society controls women's bodies and minds" (p. 120), a reading aligned with Gilbert and Gubar's concept of the madwoman in the attic, where female detention symbolizes the repression of creativity and autonomy.

2.2 Domestic Noir in the Arabic Literary Tradition

Domestic noir is not formally codified in Arabic literature as an independent genre, yet its hallmarks pervade both canonical and peripheral texts where the house is depicted as a locus of terror, violence, compulsion and resistance. Female protagonists suffer silencing, neglect, betrayal, physical coercion, and even honor killing or extreme forms of death. Early traces appear in Kahlil Gibran's *Broken Wings* (1912), which depicts familial and social codes repressing women inside their homes. Moving to mid-century fiction, this paradigm remains as seen in Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy: *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (1956), *Qasr al-Shawq* (1957), and *Al-Sukkariyya* (1957), where Amina, the wife of the authoritarian Si al-Sayyid, is silenced and spatially contained within a patriarchal architecture that encodes her subordination together with the female figures in the household. Later works like Layla Baalbaki's *Ana Ahya* (1958) and *Al-Aliha al-Mamsukha* (1960) interrogate female domestic constraints and autonomy. Following depictions based on extreme female experience, precisely in Egypt, appear in the works of Nawal El Saadawi. In *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) and *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977), she exposes how juridical and social discourses coalesce to transform the home into a theatre of psychological and gendered subjugation. She even documents the brutal practice of the Pharaonic circumcision administered in family houses on young girls, restrained by their own relatives, in the name of preserving chastity.

Contemporary Arabic fiction continues to depict the motif of the domestic noir. Hanan al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1989), *Beirut Blues* (1992), and *The Story of Zahra* (1995) all expose women in struggle with domestic powers, culminating in excessive abuse like food deprivation, daughter abandonment, incest, and even murder at the hands of partners. In Badriah Albeshr's *Hind and the Soldiers* (2006), warden-like male relatives deny Hind innocent pleasures, rendering the household into Foucauldian panopticon of patriarchal order with indoctrinated female watchers. Sanaa Shalan's *Falling in the Sun* (2019) and Sahar Khalifeh's *A Novel for My Story* (2018) reveal the oxymoronic notion of homes as being oppressive yet artistically generative.

Raja Alem's Fatma: *A Novel of Arabia* (2002) is an Arab reconfiguration of the Bluebeard archetype through a nightmarish chamber of snakes kept by a sadistic spouse, transforming the home into a site of threat and horror. Discussing Arab prison literature, Radwa Ashour (2008) draws an analogy between actual incarceration and daily domestic psychological and physical limitations imposed on women. Fadia Fakir's *Pillars of Salt* (1996) portrays, through the characters of Maha and Um Saad, women trapped in interior spaces subjecting them to surveillance, humiliation, and betrayal. Sahar Bahrawi's *Sejeen Al-Jassad* [Confined in One's Body] stages an extreme case of the domestic noir, with Rola, the protagonist, being entrapped inside her own body. Born with ambiguous genitalia in a strictly conservative, segregated society, she battles internal and external restraints that rupture her sense of identity. Collectively, these works recase domestic noir as a transnational mode interrogating a plethora of female entrapment. Similarly, Rifaat's *My World of the Unknown* presents a female protagonist navigating rural Egypt while encountering mystical forces that mirror her inner turmoil and alienation within the home, weaving cultural mysticism with a subtle critique of gender roles and societal constraints.

2.3 Domestic Noir and the Theories of Space

Gothic renderings of the home as a site of entrapment and control foreground the analytical value of spatial theory in decoding domestic noir's gendered and ideological architecture. While Bachelard (1994) envisions the house as "our corner of the world ... our first universe, a real cosmos" (p. 4), both Gilman and Rifaat subvert this phenomenology, transforming domestic interiors into a geograpy of fear and psychic disintegration. Viewed through the prism of spatial production and affective geographies**,** domestic noir illuminates the co-constitution of emotion, spatiality, and gendered constraint, where psychological tension becomes inscribed upon the body and the built environment alike (Lefebvre, 1999; de Certeau, 1984; Mehta & Bondi, 1999; Ahmed, 2004).

Doreen Massey's (1994) conception of space as ideologically produced advances the thematic evolution toward domestic noir. She contends that domestic space is never neutral but "imbued with power and symbolism," functioning as "the most powerful locus for the construction of gender identities" (p. 179). Her spatial theory elucidates how the architecture of the home in Gothic and domestic noir narratives simultaneously reflects and enforces systems of control, a dynamic embodied in both Gilman's and Rifaat's texts. Domestic noir's preoccupation with the duality of domestic space, its oscillation between sanctuary and prison, and sanity and hallucination, reveals the genre's capacity to expose how terror emerges not from the external world but from the intimate interiors of everyday life. This dialectic of safety and threat lies at the core of Gilman's and Rifaat's reimagining of the home as a psychologically charged site of gendered tension and resistance.

The protagonists' confinement within the home exemplifies Lefebvre's (1999) concept of space as socially produced, while de Certeau's (1984) insights into everyday practices reveal the subtle ways in which spatial regulation is negotiated and resisted. The Cartesian division between body and mind is reflected in the characters' internalization of fear and restriction, aligning with Mehta and Bondi's (1999) observations that social and individual meanings are enacted through embodied experience of space. Ahmed's (2004) critique of gendered hierarchies further clarifies how women's bodies are socially constructed, their mobility constrained, and their presence regulated, making fear inseparable from spatial and social limitations.

2.4 Domestic Noir and Narrative Theory

From the standpoint of narrative theory, first-person narration is central to domestic noir, intimately foregrounding the protagonist's

experience and mapping her consciousness of confinement and psychological dislocation. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *My World of the Unknown*, this perspective immerses the reader in the deep psyche of the protagonists and their internal landscapes, limiting access to external reality, and aligning with Kristeva's (1982) theory on female subjectivity under patriarchy, which "vacillates between social regulation and intimate revolt" (p. 6). In both stories, external landscapes are seldom mentioned, activities outside the domestic sphere are alarmingly absent, and female characters are domesticated in encapsulating settings. Gilman's fragmentary journal entries and Rifaat's oscillation between the physical and the fantastical world, destabilize boundaries between sanity and hallucination from one side and entrapment and liberation from the other. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's entire world is limited to the miniscule microcosm of a nursery, a space purposed for a minor rather than a woman, and therefore the entire story unfolds through her eyes to exhibit the tragedy of having to cope with this limited and heavily censored universe. In Rifaat, the story is transmitted through the protagonist whose mind map is heavily aggrieved by a senseless squatter, a narcissistic partner, and serpents, showing the outcomes of inhabiting a house that inflicts destabilization rather than stability. In fact, one main characteristic that distinguishes domestic noir is deferring the narrative authority to female narrators, enabling them to transmit their own experience. This was not the case in earlier Gothic writing (Hernández Espinoza, 2021) where women were represented rather than self-presented.

Finally, by integrating gothic and feminist conventions, spatial scholarship, and narrative theory into the frame of domestic noir through which the texts under inquiry are examined, the house is transformed into a site of psychological terror. This multi-theoretical scope underscores female entrapment cross-culturally, paving the way for a detailed, comparative analysis of both texts to emphasize the global perspective of the domestic noir genre.

3. Methodology

This study is a comparative literary and textual analysis of the domestic noir in *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (19th-century America), and *My World of the Unknown* by Alifa Rifaat (20th-century Egypt). It is a qualitative examination of the intersections of domestic confinement, patriarchal control, and psychological destabilization of the female protagonists in both settings. These seminal texts were handpicked as testimonies to exhibit that, despite the divergence in temporal, spatial and cultural backgrounds, there appears to be a parallel, transcultural display of coercive treatments that female characters experience in both texts.

The research is grounded in a multi-theoretical framework, looking at domestic noir through Gothic criticism, feminist theory, spatial theory, and narrative theory. The incorporation of these lenses, in addition to benefiting from the psychoanalytic approach in analyzing texts, demonstrates how domestic spaces can turn into sites of psychic rupture, horror, narrative tension, but also subversive resistance.

The analytical approach comprises a close reading of both primary texts, focusing on the significance of the first-person narrative voices, thematic motifs like confinement, surveillance, silencing, neglect, and coercive male partners. In addition, the study analyzes symbols like the isolated homes, doppelgängers, and walls with enchanted creatures. The research, while highlighting the chronotopic divergences of the two texts, demonstrates how they strongly converge to shape a comparable female subjectivity, lack of agency and domestic oppression. The unmistakably shared features of domestic noir in both texts justify this comparative lens, while still acknowledging the specificities of Western and Arab literary traditions.

The existing literature on Gilman's text is extensive and diverse, yet when it comes to Rifaat's story, available scholarship is sparse and heavily focused on the sensual symbolism of the snake. This study interrogates this superficial reading by offering a deeper layer in the palimpsestic text, utilizing a psychoanalytic approach that presents the female snake as *projective identification* to the abjected female protagonist, externalizing her fear and aspirations in the context of the domestic noir.

Through the methodological engagement with this multidisciplinary framework, the analysis certifies textually grounded and theoretically informed results, articulating a global discourse of female experience and resistance depicted through the domestic noir as a transnational genre.

4. Discussion, Textual Analysis, and Results

4.1 The Yellow Wallpaper: Domestic Noir in 19th-century America

4.1.1 Imprisonment within the Domestic Sphere: the Haunted House

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* establishes, from its incipit, the house as a location of the uncanny. The narrator describes it as "a colonial mansion … a haunted house" that had "stood empty for years" (Gilman, 1892, pp. 647–648). Its remoteness and "hedges and walls and gates that lock" (p. 648) transform it into a prison-like locus. This isolation and eerie climate foreshadow the physical and mental state of the female protagonist about to inhabit it. Kilgour (1995) affirms that: " The house in Gothic fiction is not just a setting; it is a character… embodying the fears and anxieties of those who live within its walls" (p. 52), while Hoeveler (1998) observes that the genre presents women whose domestic spaces "become sites of terror" where "boundaries between private and public, inside and outside, self and other" collapse (p. 34).

The nursery, converted into the couple's bedroom against the narrator's wishes, becomes a focal site of confinement and surveillance. She calls it "atrocious" (Gilman, 1892, p. 649) and laments her inability to inhabit a preferred room: "I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza… but John would not hear of it" (*p.* 648). Deprived of choice, she inhabits a space described in carceral terms: "The windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls" (p. 648). The "great immovable bed… nailed down" and walls "scratched and gouged… as if it had been through the wars" (*p.* 650) intensify the sense of violence, supervision, and restriction. Through

architecture and objects, the nursery embodies psychological entrapment, exemplifying how domestic noir renders familiar interiors oppressive.

At the heart of this claustrophobic interior lies the wallpaper, which emerges as the narrative's most unsettling and symbolically charged element, transforming the domestic space into an unheimlich environment characteristic of gothic-inflected domestic noir, whereby the familiar becomes threatening through the return of repressed associations according to Freud (1919/2003). More fully described than any of the characters, the wallpaper dominates the narrator's perception and becomes a screen for her psychological disintegration. Its patterns, "dull" yet able to "irritate and provoke," with curves that "suddenly commit suicide" and "plunge off at outrageous angles" to "destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions" (Gilman, 1892, p. 648), reflect the instability and distortion of the narrator's interior world. The words "suicide" and "destroy" (p. 648), connote death and looming danger. The wallpaper's color, a "repellent" shade of "unclean yellow" that is "sickly," "lurid," and "horrid" (p. 649), further amplifies the sense of revulsion and psychological oppression, marking the home as simultaneously intimate and threatening. Identified later as "debased Romanesque" with "delirium tremens" (p. 651), its horizontal frieze adds to the "confusion" (Gilman, 1892, p. 651) and constitutes an "optic horror" (p. 651), demonstrating how the wallpaper functions not merely as decoration but as an active agent of surveillance, constraint, and mental destabilization. This sense of scrutiny intensifies when the wallpaper appears to possess sentience, as the narrator perceives: "All those strange heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growth just shriek with derision!" (p. 655). The personification of the wallpaper, with its "eyes" that watch and judge, renders the domestic space a panoptic environment, reflecting the pervasive surveillance and psychological torment characteristic of domestic noir. In this way, the "sickly" wallpaper embodies both physical confinement and psychological deterioration, transforming the home into a locus of the uncanny.

The narrator's reflections on her environment underscore how the domestic interior enforces both physical and symbolic imprisonment. She admits, "to jump out of the window would be an admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong to even try" (Gilman, 1892, p. 656). This sentiment illustrates what Dosani (2018) identifies as the text's critique of the rest cure and male medical authority: the narrator is "confined to her nursery-bedroom for a 'rest cure,'" a condition which renders the home oppressive, and psychologically destabilizing (p. 43). Dosani's reading resonates with Freud's theorization of the unheimlich**.** In the opening entries of her journal, the narrator's mounting anger and frustration over enforced isolation and inactivity imposed by her husband and physician, are evident. This treatment is justified by his diagnosis of a "temporary nervous depression, a slight hysterical tendency" (Gilman, 1892, p. 4) following the birth of her child. The narrator declares:

> I sometimes fancy that in my condition, if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus - but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad. So, I will let it alone and talk about the house. (Gilman, 1892, p. 648)

Notaro (1999) emphasizes that the house is a socially constructed space reflecting gendered power: the narrator's wish for the downstairs room is overruled, illustrating how domestic architecture, barred windows, and detention systematically limit female autonomy (p. 77).

4.1.2 Silenced by Patriarchy: the Narcissist Male in the Domestic Noir

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's personal and intellectual autonomy is systematically curtailed by John's dual authority, combining marital dominance with medical oversight. She recounts, "There comes John, and I must put this away, he hates to have me write a word" (Gilman, 1892, p. 650), while noting his infantilizing tone: "John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage" (p. 648). Golden (1992) situates Gilman's narrative as a counter-discourse to Dr. Mitchell's infamous "rest cure," emphasizing how the prohibition of writing dramatizes the convergence of domestic and medical authority, rendering the home a space of control and oppression (p. 112).

John infantilizes his wife, utilizing medical authority: "John is a physician, and PERHAPS … PERHAPS that is one reason I do not get well faster" (Gilman, 1892, p. 647), insisting, "You see he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do?" (p. 647). His dismissal: "temporary nervous depression, a slight hysterical tendency", reinforces her helpless refrain, "what is one to do?" (p. 648). Dosani (2018) emphasizes that such male medical authority intersects with marital dominance, producing an environment where the narrator is "absolutely forbidden to 'work'" (Dosani, 2018, p. 411), with "work" here meaning writing. Yet she insists that "congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good" (Gilman, 1892, p. 648). Deprived of this outlet, she is forced into secrecy: "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it DOES exhaust me a good deal - having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (Gilman, 1892, p. 648).

The narrator's awareness of John's oppressive control underscores the climate of fear that defines domestic noir. She acknowledges, "The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John" (Gilman, 1892, p. 653) and "John is so queer now, that I don't want to irritate him" (p. 654). Even her private reflections reveal secrecy and mistrust: "I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much" (p. 655). With this metafictional remark, the narrator calls attention to the act of storytelling itself and the mediated nature of narrative. Her selective disclosure mirrors the broader dynamics of surveillance, control, and silencing imposed by John, reinforcing how fear and intimidation structure her perception of the domestic space and constrain the expression of her own voice.

This silencing reflects John's passive-aggressive behavior and culminates in gaslighting, a psychological mechanism that repetitively erodes the sense of one's reality. Deborah Philips' (2021) definition of gaslighting embodies John's behavior. As an abuser, he acts lovingly yet aims to undermine his victim. Distorting her environment and producing confusion and self-distrust, he provokes her doubts

about her own sanity. The term gaslighting originates from the 1938 melodrama *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton, where a husband alters his wife's surroundings to convince her of her own instability. The dynamics of the ostensibly caring abuser, the claustrophobic home, and the terrorized female, encapsulate the central transformation of the house to a domestic noir space. John conceals coercion beneath apparent care: "He is very careful and loving and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (Gilman, 1892, p. 648). John's theatrical tenderness masks surveillance and control and perpetuates dependence. Lima (2021) affirms that Gilman exposes the evils of the 19th-century medical treatments and patriarchal households, as her domestic structures amplify anxiety and psychological persecution, and Cavallaro (2002) adds that bourgeois families often subordinate women more effectively than the aristocrats, restricting them under the guise of civility.

Writing becomes the protagonist's only means of expression, though one fraught with fear: "I don't know why I should write this. And I know John would think it absurd. But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way - it is such a relief!" (Gilman, 1892, p. 651). John's imposition of isolation, severing the narrator from familial and social connections, intensifies her entrapment, as she declares:

> I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia. But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished. (p. 651)

John's control reflects the spatial and relational confinement of domestic noir. Plus, his indifference to her suffering exposes his self-centeredness: "John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him" (Gilman, 1892, p. 649). Trivializing her emotions amplifies patriarchal rationalization that transforms subjective distress into an intellectual failure, instigating ridicule that further enforces her subordination. She observes, "He laughs at me so about this wallpaper" (p. 649) and "he would make fun of me" (p. 653), while her anxieties are dismissed as "silly fancies" (p. 652). These actions infantilize the narrator, reinforced by diminutives such as "blessed little goose" (p. 649) and "little girl" (p. 652), erasing her capacity for rational thought and consolidating John's position as both patriarch and authoritative doctor. This linguistic diminishment is a subtle, yet persistent instrument of control and subjugation within intimate spaces. It is a reminder of Foucault's definition of power: " Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, 1977/1980, as cited in Gordon, 1980, p. 26).

Here, John's mockery exemplifies how authority is enacted not through formal structures alone but through quotidian, relational dynamics that render the narrator powerless. Even her legitimate requests to leave the house provoke reproach and intimidation, exemplifying systematic curbing. When she attempts to negotiate her desire to go out, his deadly stares silence her: "I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word" (Gilman, 1892, p. 652). John then asserts his authority as both husband and physician: "There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?", and the narrator gives up: "So of course, I said no more on that score" (Gilman, 1892, p. 652).

Therefore, domestic noir portrays the home as a site where surveillance, ridicule, and psychological coercion to maintain control. The threat of Dr. Weir Mitchell looms as further punishment: "John says if I don't pick up faster, he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall. But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!" (Gilman, 1892, p. 650). The infamous physician represents the external extension of John's coercive authority, reinforcing the alignment between patriarchal medicine and domestic entrapment.

John's sister deepens the narrator's subjugation, revealing how domestic authority is reinforced through familial complicity. The narrator remarks, "There comes John's sister. …I must not let her find me writing" (Gilman, 1892, p. 650), exposing her fear of scrutiny and suppression of intellect. As a "perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper" (p. 650), John's sister embodies the Victorian "angel in the house," enforcing ideals of female docility and propriety. The narrator's lament: "I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!" (p. 650) shows how other women can become agents of surveillance under the guise of care. Thus, households become sites of regulation and psychological constraint central to domestic noir. As Lima (2021) observes, "the family can be… a space of harmony… [but] everything can turn upside down whenever this stereotype is reversed drastically" (p. 842). The nursery itself, far from neutral, becomes a monitored space. Dosani (2018) emphasizes this as central to domestic noir: the home functions as a mechanism of surveillance, eroding female subjectivity (p. 43). Gilman's narrative dramatizes marital, medical, and psychological control, situating the domestic sphere as a site of coercion, constraint, and ultimately, resistance.

4.1.3 Psychological Deterioration and The Uncanny Interior

The uncanny transformation of the domestic interior charts the narrator's psychological collapse, illustrating the central mechanics of domestic noir. As confinement deepens, the yellow wallpaper acquires an eerie vitality, becoming a symbolic locus of her mental disintegration: "At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! … and the woman behind it is as plain as can be" (Gilman, 1892, p. 653). The wallpaper functions as both prison and mirror, reflecting her sense of entrapment.

The narrator increasingly hallucinates figures within the wallpaper, perceiving a presence behind it: "I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" (Gilman, 1892, p. 650). Home becomes a

carefully supervised prison, with John's sister acting less as companion than warden: "There's sister on the stairs!" (p. 650). She reinforces the atmosphere of fear and anxiety, extending John's authority.

Davison (2020) underscores the "female gothic" dimension of the dual patterning: the visible bars and the hidden woman behind them, which provoke a haunting psychological doubling that further amplifies confinement and surveillance. The faint wallpaper figure who looks "just as if she wanted to get out" (Gilman, 1892, p. 17) mirrors the narrator's own suppressed desire. It embodies the Gothic motif of the doppelgänger, or the double that externalizes the fragmented psyche, with which the narrator increasingly identifies, leading to her psychological and spatial collapse. Paradoxically, this entrapment becomes a perverse source of fascination: "I'm getting really fond of the room … Perhaps BECAUSE of the wall-paper" (p. 650), she confides, later adding, "Life is very much more exciting now… I really do eat better, and I am more quiet than I was" (p. 653). Oppression thus becomes a stimulant, revealing how psychic disintegration transforms her perception of reality.

From this paradox emerges the full weight of the uncanny, where the home itself becomes unhomely. In Freudian terms, the uncanny arises when the homely becomes threatening through repressed fears and physical confinement (Freud, 1919/2003, p. 16). The narrator's space is "haunted" not by ghosts but by the psychic weight of patriarchal authority, claustrophobic supervision, and barred spaces. As Davison (2020) notes, the genre thrives on the transformation of intimate spaces into sites of dread. Palmer (1991) affirms that such isolation of the female protagonist is one of the defining features of domestic noir, heightening her estrangement within the very walls of her supposed refuge. Dosani (2018) reads such a home as a site of subversion. Eventually, what begins as decline also contains the seeds of critique and resistance.

4.1.4 Symbolic Denouement: Madness as Resistance

The story's climactic ending dramatizes the narrator's full identification with the imprisoned woman in the wallpaper, reframing her psychological collapse as an act of subversive liberation: "'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'" (Gilman, 1892, p. 657). Golden (1992) celebrates this moment as staging a reclamation of agency. The narrator's final breakdown is far from a simple depiction of psychic disintegration or female hysteria; it is a radical and socially illegible assertion of autonomy against patriarchy and compulsory medical practices. Suess (2003) offers a Lacanian reading of Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, arguing that the narrator's mental breakdown in the finale is a rebellion against the Lacanian Symbolic Order, the patriarchal system of language and authority that defines and confines her. Madness is proposed as a form of resistance against the structures of suppression (Suess, 2003).

Building on the themes of domestic noir with its physical and mental captivity, Alifa Rifaat's *My World of the Unknown***,** similarly situates a female protagonist within a ghastly household. A text far remote from Gilman's historically and geographically, it similarly depicts the subversive potential of domestic noir spaces as carceral structures that engender transgressive insight and symbolic rupture.

4.2 My World of the Unknown: Domestic Noir in 20th-century Egypt

4.2.1 The Gothic House as a Prison-like Space

In *My World of the Unknown*, Alifa Rifaat situates domestic noir within the Gothic tradition, portraying the house as a space of latent terror. The abandoned mansion, which the narrator finds following her husband's deployment to a rural city, is a remote dwelling "that lay on its own amidst vast fields" (Rifaat, 1983, p. 62). It is "old and needs repair" (p. 63), with "holes in the walls and cracked masonry" (pp. 62-64), signifying decay and deterioration. When the narrator expresses her wish to rent it, her driver, Kamil, warns, "No, no, no one lives in that house… You won't like it" (pp. 62–63). While investigating the house, the narrator finds that "There are all sorts of rumors about it, the people around here believe in djinn and spirits" (p. 64). Rumors of madness and demon-possession embodied in a female squatter, Aneesa, render the house a liminal space where domesticity converges with the supernatural: "They told me that a madwoman had once lived here, and she would not leave even when driven out" (p. 30). The house is thus presented as both physically formidable and psychologically haunting. With such an opening to the story, the female experience is situated within a space of intimacy and dread, hallmarks of the domestic noir. Abbott (2018) observes that the genre binds "knowledge and power, known and familiar to the reader" (p. 283), crafting a "geography of fear" (Rodríguez-González, 2017).

Aneesa, the insane squatter who takes refuge in the deserted house, positions the space as a repository of female suffering. Her refusal to quit mirrors the narrator's entrapment. Their first encounter after the narrator's move into the house is ghostly. Aneesa interrupts the narrator's sleep in the assumed safety of her house: "I woke up to the touch of clammy fingers shaking me by the shoulders" (p. 65). Aneesa assertively commands: "I want to stay [in the house] and for you to go." The narrator's horrified retort, "Get out of here and don't come near this house" (pp. 65–66), underscores the home as a site of ongoing psychological power-struggle. Even after expulsion by the police, Aneesa haunts the house: pointing to the wall, she declares, "I'll leave her to you." When asked "Who?", Aneesa responds, "Her" leaving the narrator in a state of horrified bewilderment (p. 67) and foreshadowing a paranormal female entity behind the wall.

Besides Aneesa, the home is inhabited by snakes from the netherworld: "The servants said the snakes were not real but demons in disguise, jinn who came to drive us from the house" (Rifaat, 1983, p. 33). Remote, haunted by madness and jinn, the home loses its protective function, and instead becomes the embodiment of Bachelard's (1994) inverse topographies of intimate being, and Freud's (1919/2003) Unheimlich, where the domestic transforms into existential dread. Crumbling walls and spectral intrusions externalize estrangement (Sedgwick, 1986), while serpents exemplify the uncanny. The epitome of Bhabha's (1994) "shock of recognition of the

world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world" (p. 13), reveals domestic spaces as psychologically and culturally dislocated. Bachelard's phenomenology of the house as reverie and memory (Bachelard, 1964/2014) is inverted here, as domestic space becomes a threshold between the common and the uncanny. Hidden doubles, exemplified by the supernatural serpents (echoing Gilman's wallpaper woman), manifest repressed trauma and collapsing boundaries between safety and danger.

4.2.2 Aneesa as the "Madwoman in the Attic"

Aneesa functions as the embodiment of the "madwoman in the attic," bridging the Gothic and domestic noir traditions. Secluded from society within the haunted house, her existence is veiled in mystery and rumor. She is "a stranger to the town" (Rifaat, 1983, p. 63), banished with her child after an unnamed transgression, as rumors circulate:

> She was the wife of a well-to-do teacher living in a nearby town. One night he had caught her in an act of infidelity, and in fear she had fled with her son and had settled here, no one knows why she had betaken herself to this particular house. (67)

Emphasizing her insanity, villagers whisper that "people passing by [the] house at night would hear her conversing with unknown persons" (p. 67). This aura of estrangement and scandal aligns her with the Gothic archetype of the exiled, silenced woman while also resonating with domestic noir's concern with hidden trauma and social shame. Aneesa speaks with nobody but is spoken about and spitefully represented. The silencing of women in such a patriarchal setting emerges as a key mechanism of repression, reinforcing societal control and limiting their agency (Nkealah, 2008).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Aneesa operates as a double figure projecting the protagonist's disavowed fears and transgressive compulsions, which illustrates the psychoanalytic interpretation of narrative dissociation, in which marginalized women materialize split-off psychic conditions (Becker & Sjöström, 2024). Employing the psychoanalytic lens places Aneesa as the embodiment of the socially and psychically abjected female figure that the protagonist fails to internally integrate. Thus, Aneesa operates as a *projective identification* to the protagonist, externalizing the denied aspects of the protagonist's self, and carrying the psychic burden of her character (Felman & Laub, 1992; Harris, 2009). Aneesa's stigmatized mother identity and her dialogues with unseen phantoms make her a repository of the unspeakable female protagonist's simultaneous fears and desires of transgression and expression.

The narrator's initial encounter with Aneesa crystallizes the Gothic charge of domestic space. When the narrator arrives with Kamil to inspect the house, Aneesa's spectral resistance to allow them in, unsettles ownership and belonging: "In a strange silence, she stood as though nailed to the ground… 'No,' she said quite simply. I turned helplessly to Kamil, who went up to her and pushed her violently in the chest so that she staggered back" (Rifaat, 1983, p. 65). Her refusal to relinquish the house and her sorrow when expelled transform her into a haunting presence whose attachment to space embodies the buried anguish of dispossessed women. Her "predilection for silence and isolation from people" (p. 67) reads less as illness than as defiance, an embodied protest against erasure. The physical violence exercised by Kamil portrays, from a psychoanalytic lens, the common "pejorative attitudes toward marginalized people" (Adel, 2023, p.3).

As Gilbert and Gubar (1979/2000) argue, the "madwoman in the attic" externalizes women's suppressed rage and psychic confinement. Aneesa represents this haunting of patriarchal space: she is the narrator's silenced double, a spectral reminder of what repression and neglect produce. Aneesa becomes the *doppelgänger*, the double, that mirrors the narrator's marital desolation and suppressed despair. The home becomes a contested, paradoxical space as both refuge and prison, ruled by a spectral female figure, a symbolic absence of the husband, and the imposing presence of supernatural snakes.

4.2.3 The Serpent as Doppelgänger, Guardian and Transgressive Other

The serpents in Rifaat's story are more than uncanny dwellers of the domestic noir. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the snake that befriends the protagonist aligns with the theories of the non-human *other*, whose liminal presence symbolizes repressed desires (Weeks & Barjon, 2025) and destabilizes the frontiers between reality and fantasy to reveal fissures in subjectivity (Grosz, 2021). This non-human *other* becomes a site of intertwining repression and desire, destabilizing the harmony of domesticity (Royle, 2003).

The narrator recalls her first encounter with "snake queen": "My gaze was attracted by something twisting and turning" (Rifaat, 1983, p.68); "It was a long smooth tube, at its end a small striped head with two bright, wary eyes" (p. 68). She becomes transfixed and terrified by the snake's bending movement: "My senses were numbed… I felt terror turning my blood cold and freezing my limbs" (p. 68). Yet she was overcome by an uncontrollable sense of allure: "my attraction to it paralyzed my limbs and I did not move. I kept on watching it, utterly entranced and captivated" (p.68). She even questioned killing the snake: "or should I enjoy the rare moment of beauty that had been afforded me?" (p.68). This mixture of fascination and fright embodies Freud's notion of the unheimlich, the return of the repressed when the familiar turns strange (Freud, 1919/1999).

The narrator's husband calls a religious Sheikh to spiritually cleanse the house after finding the serpent, yet the Sheikh has a secret to share with the protagonist: "Madam, the sovereign of the house has sought you out and what you saw is no snake, rather it is one of the monarchs of the earth" (Rifaat, 1983, p. 69). Here, Rifaat subverts Western iconography, reclaiming the serpent from its biblical legacy. Rather than a demonic tempter, the snake embodies vitality, intimacy, and solace. Taken from a relational psychoanalytic perspective, the narrator's idiosyncratic bond with the snake is a compensatory connection to preserve her psychic coherence while suffering conjugal neglect (Mitchell & Aron, 1999). In such cases, the person's capacity for intersubjective connection is destabilized, and attachments are

formed outside conventional human bonds to compensate unmet affective needs and ongoing relational failure (Becker & Sjöström, 2024; Benjamin, 2018).

In Arab cultural heritage, snakes in the house can be demons in disguise. Humans forming relationships with devilish creatures are bestowed with supernatural powers; thus, the serpent here represents possibility, not destruction. The snake becomes the "caretaker of the house" who promises to protect the narrator: "I am the guardian of the house, and I hold sway over the snakes and vipers that inhabit it… it shall be a pact between us" (p. 73). A symbol of trust and feminine awakening to concealed realms, the snake also enacts the Gothic double motif, the doppelgänger, externalizing repressed selves within the home. This echoes the Islamic belief of *al-Qareen*, one's spiritual double, reflecting hidden emotions and suppressed identity. Freud's insight into cultural taboos can explain how Arabic traditions of djinn transform the snake into a monarch of the unseen, situating the uncanny within local spiritual imagination. Al-Sudairy (2013) confirms that Middle Eastern iconography of snakes signifies "femininity, fertility, knowledge, and liminality," while El Saadawi (1980) observes the dominance of the she-devil motif in Arabic literature.

Unlike Gilman's creeping woman, whose liberation ends in lunacy, Rifaat's serpent offers communion and agency. Both figures enact what Gilbert and Gubar (1979/2000) label as the "madwoman in the attic," projecting silenced female interiority. Emerging from walls that confine them, these doubles transform repression into expression. Freud's unheimlich resurfaces as the domestic uncanny: what is suppressed returns as both monstrous and familiar. The union with the serpent allows the narrator to transgress domestic and spiritual boundaries, converting the Gothic double into a symbol of female agency. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979/2000) contend, such doubles articulate what patriarchal discourse seeks to silence, making Rifaat's serpent an uncanny manifestation of estrangement, desire, and rebellion against emotional neglect. Gilbert and Gubar (1979/2000) also note that "women's writing has often centered on the confrontation between the angel and the monster, roles imposed by patriarchy and resisted through literature" (p. 17).

4.2.4 Marital Neglect, Coercive Abuse and the Domestic Noir

Marital neglect emerges as a subtle yet pervasive mark of the domestic noir: the husband's emotional withdrawal renders daily life isolating, compounding an oppressive silence that dramatizes the psychic consequences of abandonment. The wife's feelings of loneliness, insecurity and estrangement in an unknown town while selecting the family home exemplifies abandonment.

The story unfolds with the wife taking a lonely trip on "the train", itself a heterotopic or liminal, threshold space, symbolic of an inner psychic shift to the unknown. The husband: "busy with his work, delegated me the task of going to this town to choose suitable accommodation prior to his taking up the new appointment" (Rifaat, 1983, p.62). What seems practical masks disengagement, exemplifying Phillips' (2021) notion of coercive control. Victor (2012) notes that such narratives "admit the reader into a hidden private world … often characterized by profound anguish and personal isolation" (p. 24). Phillips (2012) identifies domestic menace and brutal male figures as central to domestic noir. In *My World of the Unknown*, Rifaat transforms overt brutality into marital neglect, a subtler yet destructive coercive abuse enacted through emotional absence and managerial detachment.

Neglect deepens after relocation: "My husband arrived, then the furniture … My husband was busy with his work" (p. 66). Solitude becomes coercive endurance: "I came to live in a state of continuous torment … while my circumstances obliged me to carry out the duties and responsibilities that had been placed on me as the wife of a man who occupied an important position" (p. 71). Subverting Bachelard's (1964/2014) depiction of the home as a "locus of comfort," the emotional void of the protagonist renders the house a location of suffering, and solitude, intensified by the absence of her spouse.

Victor (2012) emphasizes that Rifaat "presents men as callous, selfish and highly insensitive to the feelings of their marital partners" (p. 24), a pattern mirrored in another of her stories, "The Thursday Lunch," where the protagonist "ironically experiences loneliness" despite familial company (p. 26). Through quotidian neglect, Rifaat reconceives domestic space as coercive, where fear, isolation, and power operate invisibly in intimate, gendered relationships (Phillips, 2021; Samarawickrama, 2022). Lima (2021) and Phillips (2021) note that domestic noir replaces overt crime with subtle, insidious violences of intimacy, neglect, coercion, and silencing, making Rifaat's narrative a Gothic exploration of everyday terror.

The husband's reaction to his wife's initial fear when hearing about reptiles living in the house is pragmatic and devoid of empathy, giving her orders: "'Let's be practical … and stop all the cracks at the bottom of the outside walls and put wire mesh over the windows'" (Rifaat, 1983, p. 70). Later, when "the hole was wide open," he "filled up the crack with cement and went to sleep" (p. 73). His insistence on neglecting her anxiety without comforting her epitomizes desertion: "once again he stopped it up … [and] carried the bed to another corner" (p. 75). Literal repairs mirror the figurative sealing of her interior life. Their exchanges remain functional and lack tenderness. His treatment of his wife embodies what Samarawickrama (2022) and Phillips (2021) define as coercive neglect, where patriarchal protection effaces female interiority. Later, his reliance on extreme institutional authority with the destitute single-mother Aneesa reveals his ruthlessness: "He contacted the police and asked them to come and take her away" (p.66). Aneesa externalizes the wife's repression, being ousted and unwelcome in the only abode available to her.

The protagonist's eventual breakdown completes this cycle of erasure. Pleading to her husband to help her, she cries, "I am ill … I am ill" (p.74), but he calls the doctor who diagnoses her with "nervous depression" (p. 74). Indifferent and apathetic, like the husband, the doctor fails to see her mental breakdown: "Having prescribed various medicaments, he left. The stupidity of doctors!" (p. 75). Like in Gilman's story, medical and marital authority converge to silence women by pathologizing unrest. Rifaat exemplifies domestic noir, where intimacy curdles into domination disguised as care. Millett (1970) asserts patriarchy maintains power through "a politics of sexuality" that

normalizes male authority in private life. Professional busyness thus becomes socially sanctioned control, and neglect is reframed as responsibility.

4.2.5 Silence and Withdrawal in Domestic Noir

Crushed by her husband's unresponsive attitude towards her calls for help, and his dismissal of her being indeed "ill", the narrator becomes figuratively muted: "I would become very silent and withdrawn" (p. 61). She even abandoned her daily routine, being dissipated and depressed: "I neglected my garden and stopped wandering about in it. Generally I would spend my free time in bed" (Rifaat, 1983, p. 70). This retreat marks her interior collapse, suffering loneliness in a family house populated by her own people: "no one around me would be aware of what was happening to me." (P.61). A similar trajectory is depicted in another of Rifaat's stories, Distant View of a Minaret, where the protagonist, alienated from childhood, embraces silence as both survival and symptom, marking the psychic toll of domestic erasure. As critics observe, "The violence of the everyday, the power that domesticity has to render women silent and invisible, is a kind of horror story in itself" (Cusk, 2012, p.76), which aligns with the domestic noir rhetoric under study.

During the entire course of the narrative, silence shrouds the relationship of the two spouses, with less than a handful of words exchanged. Most of their speeches are delivered in the form of one-sided monologues, or even through gestures, as when the narrator first spotted the location of the serpent: "Once again I was overcome by fear. I pointed out the crack to my husband, unable to utter" (p.73). Then, "I showed my husband the enlarged hole in the wall and once again he stopped it up" (p. 75). Not giving the wife the room for self-expression creates this wall of silence in the marriage. Arab feminist scholarship underscores that women's muteness is rarely voluntary. As Cameron (1990) explains, "for it is not just that women do not speak: often they are explicitly prevented from speaking, either by social taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice" (p. 4). Even Aneesa is often silent or silenced, as the narrator observes: "She looked at me in a daze. For a long time, she was silent" (p. 65). Rifaat, by articulating previously suppressed emotions and desires, contests, like other Arab women writers, the patriarchal structures that marginalize female voices, challenging the notion that "the order of language is a masculine order dominated by the phallus" (Cameron, 1990, p. 9). Entering a literary tradition long defined by men, writers like Rifaat turn authorship into an act of resistance and self-assertion.

Silence intertwines with Rifaat's gothic, domestic noir narrative. Her heroine finds refuge in the uncanny double, the she-serpent, whose companionship contrasts sharply with her husband's emotional absence. The narrator and the serpent exchange lengthy dialogues that occupy a considerable narrative space, confirming their meaningful rapport. This, again, represents the replacement of the human with the *non-human other* from a psychoanalytic scope to fill the emotional void (Weeks & Barjon, 2025).

The story's conclusion dramatizes this silencing of the protagonist. The husband defies the sheikh's warning against harming the house snakes, by killing one of them, thereby violating the spiritual and moral order of the space: "one morning my husband went out on the balcony … I heard him utter a cry of alarm. We all hurried out to find him holding a stick, with a black, ugly snake almost two meters long, lying at his feet" (p. 76). The narrator, fearing the fury that will follow, and anxious to lose the bond with the queen serpent for killing one of her subjects, falls into a nervous breakdown:

> I cried out in sorrow, whose claws clutched at my heart so that it began to beat wildly. With crazed fury, I shouted at my husband: 'Why have you broken the pact and killed it? What harm has it done?' (P.76)

The husband faces her anguish with complete silence and disregard. By killing the snake, he brutally severs the narrator's connections to the paranormal world in which she lives fascinating moments of joy in a heterotopic haven remote from her daily realities. The protagonist, therefore, awaits the consequences and dreads the wrath of the queen serpent: "I spent the night sorrowful and apprehensive" (p. 76). The snake arrives with the tragic news, expelling the narrator from the house for good: "'It is farewell," the serpent queen said. 'You have broken the pact and have betrayed one of my subjects, so you must both depart from this house'" (p. 76). This ending frames the husband as the true agent of destruction, "for perfect beauty is to be found only in a woman" (p. 67). The narrative thus exposes not the instability of the female figures (the protagonist, Aneesa, or the she-serpent) but the male's capacity for violence and perfidy.

Rifaat portrays a counter-myth of the serpent, not as Eve's betrayer but as her secret double, her alter ego. Subverting Judeo-Christian symbolism, Rifaat reclaims the serpent as an emblem of feminine empowerment and voice, embodying what patriarchal culture seeks to suppress. From a theoretical perspective, this doubling recalls Cixous's écriture féminine, where expression arises from the unconscious "dark continent," defying phallocentric language (Cixous, 1976/1975). Kristeva (1980) similarly conceives the semiotic, maternal unconscious as a repressed yet generative force. In Rifaat's text, the serpent extends this chora**,** the pre-symbolic, maternal space of creation, giving voice to what patriarchy silences.

4.2.6 The Symbolic Finale: a Threshold between Two Worlds

The retrospective narration of *My World of the Unknown* culminates in an open-ended finale that underscores the narrator's liminal state between her actual world and that mystical one she once cherished: "I used to pass with amazing speed between this tangible world of ours and another invisible earth, mixing in the two worlds on one and the same day, as though living it twice over" (Rifaat, 1983, p. 61). She confesses: 'I crave for the house" (p.76). These declarations embody the spirit of the uncanny as it oscillates between material and spectral realms and creates a doubling that can fracture domestic normalcy and destroy patriarchal order. According to Kristeva (1982), these contraventions stand as a crossing of symbolic thresholds, or an abjection of normative structures that shake and recreate identity. Through the relationship with the serpent, the narrator achieves a spiritual fulfillment unattainable within her human surroundings.

The narrative technique, which is fragmentary and shattered, with a retrospective style, optimizes symbolism over the linear chronological order. This mirrors not only the protagonist's confusion and disorientation but also the textual desire of revolting against the canon by giving women the power of representation. The ambiguous narrative enriches the gothic sense of the domestic noir, as the protagonist's testimony remains questionable and elusive. Perched between confinement and liberation, the narrative compels readers to witness the lingering effects of emotional abuse and uncanny intimacy.

The ending of Rifaat's story parallels Gilman's in that liberation is posited as both unsettling and indeterminate. While the domestic sphere remains a site of turmoil and suppression, its uncanny features offer a gateway to resistance and self-realization. Through *My World of the Unknown*, Riffaat portrays the Egyptian domestic noir utilizing the conventional gothic motifs, the haunted house, the mad woman, the tyrannical villain, and the grotesque double, with culturally specific ingredients such as the belief in jinn and al-Qareen. The home becomes a locus of unpredictable terror perpetuated by spousal neglect, silencing, physical and psychic confinement. Introducing the supernatural into the domestic sphere, Rifaat exposes the intersection of gender, spirituality, and culture, demonstrating how the local Egyptian context intensifies the emotional and psychic drawback of domestic oppression, while broadening the global scope of the domestic noir far beyond the west-centric perspective.

5. Conclusion

This comparative study of The *Yellow Wallpaper* (19th-century America) and *My World of the Unknown* (20th-century rural Egypt) two seemingly remote texts historically and geographically, demonstrate their articulation of a shared logic of domestic noir, in which houses function as sites of terror, gradually transforming into heterotopic spaces of resistance. Gilman problematizes 19th-century medical and familial practices coercive towards women, while Rifaat interrogates the social marginalization amalgamated with cultural mysticism in 20th-century Egypt. To sharpen the immersion into their protagonists' domestic entrapment, both writers employ the first-person narrative, recounting daily traumas in Gothic-like domestic interiors featuring intimidation, surveillance, silencing, gaslighting, and neglect. In the incipit of both texts, the eerie, abandoned, and isolated houses are presented as major characters, embodying the domestic noir in its grandest manifestation.

Beyond the haunted houses, and the first-hand narration reinforcing the psychical immersion into dread and endangerment, the similarities between the two texts are unmistakable. Both texts present patriarchal domination personified through narcissists, controlling spouses. The walls in both houses are the abodes of uncanny, supernatural female creatures that initially alarm, then fascinate the narrators. The wallpaper woman in Gilman, and the snake queen in Rifaat, function as doppelgängers, externalizing the protagonists' repressed desires and disavowed selves. They return as uncanny doubles that both threaten and enable psychic integration, and operate as the mediators of liminality, allowing the crossing between the conditions of entrapment and emancipation. These doppelgängers personify Freud's *unheimlich* as they create a liminal, blurry presence reminiscent of what Gilbert and Gubar would describe as "textual escape hatches" (2000), or gestures of defiance expressed in confinement. Both texts employ established Gothic conventions, retaining enduring relevance for contemporary literary discourse. Both texts present the psychological and spatial deterioration of the protagonists towards an open-ended finale, which is not only a reminder of "the madwoman in the attic" motif from the Gothic tradition, but also a threshold to a passage between the actual and the oneiric, offering a gateway to resistance and self-realization. In addition, unresolved endings, madness motifs, and distorted realities appear to destabilize normative understandings of sanity.

Given all these factors, what this study aims to prove is far beyond the similarities between specific manifestations or local colorings. Ultimately, this research positions domestic noir as a transnational discourse of spatial and psychological resistance which transcends geographical and historical boundaries, functioning as a critical prism through which the politics of space and the poetics of female interiority intertwine. Both Gilman and Rifaat, despite being worlds apart, construct the home as a site of disciplinary architecture in which the domestic sphere is loaded with a dynamic palimpsest of gendered power and aspiration and operates as a dynamic ideological terrain. Homes simultaneously stifle, yet recreate female subjectivity, transforming confinement into a narrative of survival and self-assertion. Gilman and Rifaat resolve this binary: the monstrous becomes a vessel of agency. Women's silenced voices emerge through coded speech, illuminating the narrator's obsessive journal writing in Gilman, and the bonding with the serpent queen in Rifaat. Resistance can paradoxically be born from cruelty and suffering.

The multi-theoretical approach employed in the study, including Gothic, feminist, spatial and narrative, while also benefiting from the psychoanalytic approach, all solidify the argument of this study and assist in affirming that despite the distinct contexts, both texts participate in a wider transnational, cross-cultural domestic noir tradition. To different women around the world, homes can be heterotopic sites where patriarchal control and latent resistance coexist as a location of intricate entanglement of gender, space and subject formation. The two narrators of Gilman and Rifaat, remain unnamed. On a superficial level, this could be regarded as a reflection of loss of identity; however, the deeper connotation stresses their anonymity as symbolic, allowing them to represent women across different cultural places and historical periods. In short, placing Gilman and Rifaat in a dialogue offers a fresh expansion on domestic noir and Gothic feminist scholarship, presenting a transnational discourse that bridges Western and Arab literary traditions to articulate shared patterns of female disempowerment and resistance.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

Not applicable

Funding

We thank the Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies, Research & Business at Dar Al-Hekma University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia for funding this research project and for offering their technical support.

Competing interests

Not applicable

Informed consent

Not applicable

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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