

# Alone or in Solitude: A Literary Exploration of Rest Cure and Solo Culture in Two Fictional Works

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**Abstract**—Loneliness and solitude are two distinct terms often used interchangeably in literature to describe characters who are detached from society. The transition from loneliness to the rise of 'Super-Solo Culture' has been observed in recent years, particularly in Japan, which has led to a preference for living and doing things alone, away from society. This phenomenon has emerged in the past few decades as people in Metropolitan cities choose to live alone rather than have a companion. The paper attempts to unravel the relationship between Solitude and Loneliness and how it has evolved. It attempts to capture the mentality of the characters who undergo mental and physical traumas. Both voluntary and involuntary isolation are taken into consideration for analysis. This paper aims to analyse the gender norms of two cultures that led to the rest cure and solo culture in their respective time. Textual analysis is conducted in the works of *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997) by Haruki Murakami. The Cultural background of these selected works varies from American to Japanese societies, providing a rich variation in history and culture. Though it is based on fiction, it mirrors the reality of the times it represents. The study aims to demonstrate how people's perceptions of loneliness have altered society and literature throughout the centuries.

**Index Terms**—loneliness, solitude, mental health, PTSD, rest cure

## I. INTRODUCTION

Studies on mental health have evolved from the practice of bleeding out as a cure to modern medicine, which has advanced to the creation of functioning heart cells from stem cells. The evolution of medicine has undergone a significant transformation, and many more advancements are expected. One such enormous transformation is the treatment of women's mental health issues, which was previously named hysteria. It has changed to proper medical terminology, such as postpartum depression, Premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and other hormone-induced emotions that women go through. This evolution is an immense transformation, which both empowers women to regulate their emotions to get the necessary help and enlightens society that drains women physically and mentally through their menstruation and pregnancy. This paper analysed the 'Rest Cure' treatment administered by the famous neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell, which involved women staying away from their families, refraining from work, and even abandoning their hobbies. They were asked to take bed rest for 6 weeks and fed with fat-rich foods to fatten them up, as most of them were suffering from anaemia due to miscarriages.

A few hundred years ago, psychologists thought women could not handle the pressure of academics and advised them to work on procreation and child rearing, stating it as the primary purpose of their very existence. The patriarchal system pitted women against being the angels of the house without having an identity, voice, or place of their own. The mindset changed over the century as women got an education and worked for their living without expecting a man to be the sole breadwinner and protector.

Super solo culture is a rising social behaviour in Japanese culture where people prefer doing things alone. Kazuhisa Arakawa explained this concept in his book, *The Super Solo Society*, where he observed how Japanese society is shifting towards a solo culture, and many establishments are catering to their needs. The paper analysed the voluntary and involuntary loneliness in two fictional works, where women are isolated for their hysteria as a rest cure, and now young populations are in self-imposed isolation, which has given rise to many terminologies and businesses enabling their solo culture and lifestyle.

Two fictional works are chosen for the analysis of the two phenomena (Rest Cure and Super solo culture): *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a semi-biographical short story by an American writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, a magical realist novel by Japanese writer Haruki Murakami (1994), which was later translated into English by Jay Rubin in 1997. These two works contrast in their theme, story, and setting, but the portrayal of loneliness, both voluntary and involuntary, by the protagonist is the common theme analysed here.

Haruki Murakami is a famous novelist and non-fiction writer; his works are renowned for their surreal, magical realist elements and for the protagonists who exhibit similar anti-social characteristics. They are loners who do not engage in socialising with society. Creating a reality of his own is a signature of Murakami's style. This paper tries to analyse one such character from his earliest works, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* (1997).

*The Yellow Wallpaper* is a semi-autobiographical work, a testimony to the rest cure treatment practised by Silas Weir Mitchell, who did not differentiate between male and female physiology. The recurring representation of women in nineteenth-century literature portrays them as "angels of the house" whose sole existence is centred around childbearing and raising their children to be reputable individuals in high society. The doctors' treatment was to ensure they were as domesticated as possible without having an intellectual vigour of their own.

As a response to her work, the author published *Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper* (October 1913) in *The Forerunner*. The author explained why she penned her experience in a fictional note. Initially, her work was met with opposition by doctors: "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (Gilman, 1913). After the publication, the specialist modified his treatments, which were later shown to be beneficial in aiding women facing similar procedures. In Modern times, the treatments carried out by the physician were termed gendered and didn't cure women for their illness, while it has benefited men with their rest cure to an extent.

According to the American Psychological Association, "Historians now view Mitchell's 'Rest Cure' as a striking example of 19th-century medical misogyny" (Stiles, 2012). His gendered misogyny was prevalent in American history "While Mitchell put worried women to bed, he sent anxious men out West to engage in prolonged periods of cattle roping, hunting, roughriding and male bonding" (Stiles, 2012). Some of his famous patients include Walt Whitman, Thomas Eakins, Owen Wister, and Theodore Roosevelt. Although his treatments proved beneficial for men, but reinforced gendered stereotypes by confining women to their traditional feminine roles., "For Mitchell, at least, 'healthy' for women included strict limits on 'brain work,' which he felt imposed nervous strain and might interfere with womanly duties" (Martin, 2007).

In an article, *Doctoring The Yellow Wallpaper*, Thrailkill (2002) delved deeper into the treatment of Mitchell, who was working in the army with men who were injured physically and suffering from the shell shock of the war, which is now termed shell shock or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The hysteria of the 19th century, which Gilman was treated for, could be the recent mental health condition, Postpartum depression, that women undergo after childbirth. The understudied mental health issues paved the way for eccentric treatments by doctors who were ignorant about the workings of female bodies and hormone functions.

In an article about *The Writing Cure: Charlotte and "Hysterical" Writing*, hysteria is defined as "a woman's response to a system in which she is expected to remain silent, a system in which her subjectivity is continually denied, kept invisible" (Herndl, 1988, p. 53). The article further explores how the act of women writing has opened many avenues of possibilities for women writers. Women were usually the object or subject of inspiration rather than the subjects who expressed their own feelings. The rest cure is disrupted by the writing cure of women writers, who have helped women become visible in the male-dominated literary system.

In the male-defined signifying system, the woman, who has historically been the subject of literature or the inspiration for literature, cannot be the subject-who-writes; thus, in becoming a writer, the woman comes to inhabit a different cultural position, a position which opens new possibilities to her. (Herndl, 1988, p. 53)

Charlotte also claimed that writing had cured her, while the rest, which was supposed to cure her, drove her to madness. The lack of intellectual work and the prolonged idleness could not cure any soul, as the weakness in the mental and physical body is entirely different entities that ought to be cured differently for men and women. She recalled how going against her doctor's advice helped her recover.

Using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again--work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite. (Gilman, 1913)

In contrast, we encounter another social phenomenon in modern Japan, known as 'solo culture', where voluntary loneliness is accepted as part of the contemporary Japanese way of life. Japan's single lifestyle has been on the rise, and the government has implemented many measures to boost childbirth, as the birth rate continues to decline consistently. In Japan, people embrace their singlehood with the concept called "Ohitorisama," known as solo culture, where the younger generation takes pleasure in attending social events without a companion. In one of the analyses of the depiction of Ohitorisama in *Media Narratives of Single Japanese women*, it is stated that:

Early portrayals of singleness are empowering and progressive for viewers; for example, in asides to the camera, she discusses her pleasure in dining out alone and in joining classes for fun and self-development opportunities she credits to having because of her single status. (Collins, 2011, p. 89)

While educated single women are portrayed as happily pursuing their dreams and setting an example for future generations, ultimately, when it comes to work-life balance, they find themselves torn between work and family. "On the other hand, however, each one is eventually confronted with an agonizing choice—to follow their hearts or to continue their chosen career paths—which calls into question the social discourse relating to self-determination for contemporary Japanese" (Collins, 2011, p. 90). The rising growth of the cultural phenomenon is observed as a bold statement rather than a crippling anxiety. Japan's *Super Solo Society* estimates that 50% of the population aged 15 or older will live in

single-person households by 2040 (BBC, 2020). Recently, Japan Today's (2024) article '*Bocchi*' Culture: Japan's Loner Lifestyle sheds light on the evolution of trending terminologies, like *Bocchi meshi* (eating alone), *bocchi ramen* (eating ramen alone), and *kuribocchi* (being alone during Christmas), which are considered some of the new wave solo culture terms used in social media in Japan.

#### A. Research Question

1. The evolution of mental health and its representation in literature has been a much sought-after change over the decades. Has this century brought phenomenal changes concerning mental health?
2. Is patriarchy the leading cause for both the voluntary and involuntary seclusion of the fictional characters mentioned in the study?
3. How can loneliness be a comfort and a prison?

#### B. Research Gap

The paper attempts to connect two cultural phenomena rooted in mental health. One's culture influences how one reacts to a situation. Here, we examine Japan's solo culture in contrast to the rest cure in American society in the 1800s. The root of loneliness is explored through two different situations: one where an individual voluntarily chooses to remain aloof from society, and another where loneliness is imposed upon them in the disguise of treatment. This study offers a new perspective on Japan and America's two culturally significant fictional works. There are limited to no works produced on the comparison of these two fictional works in terms of loneliness. This study sheds light on the misogyny associated with women's mental health and personal choices.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative analysis is employed in this paper. Additionally, textual analysis is applied to the two selected fictional works: *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. The paper examines these primary texts for elements of loneliness experienced by the protagonists. While one finds comfort in it, the other becomes trapped by the same loneliness. Textual analysis offers a unique opportunity to compare two renowned works from their century, focusing on the central theme of this paper: loneliness. The secondary sources include scholarly interpretations, review articles, and academic research. Gilman's account of her personal experience, which led her to write the novel, is included in the work, providing a profound and authentic record of the nature of the treatment without being dismissed as fiction. Both the works of Gilman reflect her personal experience with the rest cure and demonstrate that medical treatment for women suffering from depression is not a one-size-fits-all approach. The protagonists from the novel and the novella reflect the essence of loneliness in different contexts: the female is forced to be isolated from her family, while the male chooses voluntary isolation as a part of his solidarity.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. *The Yellow Wallpaper's* Loneliness

The *Yellow Wallpaper* opens with a haunting description of the house where the couple resides: "A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 3). The story begins with an unnamed narrator describing her mansion and her husband. Although the house is beautiful and costly, she notices something strange. She must cease most activities as part of her treatment, especially writing and working, known as the rest cure. "I take phosphates or phosphates—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am forbidden to 'work' until I am well again. I disagree with their ideas" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 3). A key aspect of the rest cure is that patients are forbidden from engaging in any physical activity that might tire them easily. Despite her physician husband's, the author continues to write.

"I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 6). The feeling of being a burden is seen in her non-fiction work, as she thinks of being a "pauper and parasite" without work or of any use to the household. The very act of stopping her from writing has driven her to madness, which was later cured by defying the rules. Her nursery has yellow wallpaper, which she finds strange, formless, and disturbing. Her patronising husband advised her to follow the rest cure. She is left all alone with wallpaper, which she has grown accustomed to as it is her only source of companionship and entertainment. The wife yearns for intellectually stimulating company to make her feel sane again. However, she was refrained from contact with the outside world, stripped of her passion for writing, and this has slowly driven her into madness. The rest that is supposed to cure her of the alleged illness became the aggravating source of her insanity. Her delusion made her believe that there was a woman trapped inside the wallpaper, but she failed to acknowledge that it was she who was trapped inside the house. Over time, she convinced herself that many women are trapped behind the wallpaper, and she has escaped it. As an act of rescuing those women from the confines of the wallpaper, she began tearing the yellow wallpaper down bit by bit. She finally tore down the wallpaper and started crawling along the walls, round and round the room. Her husband opened the door and fainted at the sight of her plight in the room.

The wallpaper serves as a powerful symbol for the narrator. From being an eyesore, it became her purpose to save the

imaginary women trapped inside the wall, like her, trapped by the walls. The fictional story serves as a real-life semi-autobiographical work of the author, who has been part of the rest cure herself. While many women have sung praises about the treatment's effectiveness, there have been disputes, to say the least. "I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over" (Gilman, 1913). The rest cure her did not work for her; it further pushed her away from sanity. The medical practitioner instructed the women to follow domestic life as much as possible, which he thought would bring peace to them.

### B. *Wallpaper as a Catalyst*

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the author has mixed opinions about the wallpaper throughout the work. It began to be part of the room she disliked, and it grew on her to become irritating. Later, it drove her to the brink of her sanity. The Yellow Wallpaper, the titular character in this work, acts as a catalyst; it provoked her by its mere existence. Eventually, she grew accustomed to it by living with it every day: "I never saw a worse paper in my life" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 5) to "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps *because* of the wallpaper" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 9). The speaker notices how children tried to tear it, "no wonder the children hated it!" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 5), and at times she felt grateful that her child did not have to look at it any longer, like her. Later, she sensed a woman was lurking inside the wallpaper. She projected her feelings into the wallpaper and started associating it with her personality and mood.

She was stuck in the room, like wallpaper stuck to the wall without any real purpose to serve, and she started to feel like a burden who could not do anything on her own. Like the wallpaper, she is held captive in the room where she badly wanted to escape. The physician husband, who was worried about her condition, also made her believe that rest was making her better. "It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. I wish I could get well faster" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 7). Deprived of intellectual curiosity, she looked forward to being normal, away from the room. Over time, she hallucinated seeing a person inside the wallpaper lurking and attempting to escape from its clutches: "The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out." A sense of helplessness is mentioned recurrently about the trapped women inside the wallpaper: "Nobody could climb through the pattern" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 15).

The frustration of dealing with the inconsistent pattern of the wallpaper exhausted the narrator: "Round and round and round – it makes me dizzy" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 15). As a retaliation, on the last day of their departure, the speakers tore apart the paper, which also symbolised her last day in the rest cure, where she convinced herself the woman trapped inside the wallpaper is the speaker herself. "I've got out at last, and I've pulled out most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman, 1892, 2011, p. 18). The final act of getting rid of the wallpaper parallels her release from the rest cure practised by her husband, John. Getting rid of the wallpaper and the room was the act of the narrator reclaiming herself.

### C. *Well, as a Portal*

While *the yellow wallpaper* tried to analyse the involuntary isolation of the rest cure thrust upon them, one contrast to the theme is the novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami. Here, the characters explore isolation as solitude by getting into an abandoned, dried-up well, which helps them transport themselves to another place in real time while inside the well. The well is a symbolic representation of the core Japanese characters. In *Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, the well acts as a portal and a medium for Toru to communicate with the outside world without travelling anywhere. He derives the idea of a well as a space of enlightenment from the war veteran Lieutenant Mamiya, who was once thrown into the well by Mongolian soldiers and was left there to die right after witnessing the ruthless skinning of a man alive. After the ordeal he survived, the experience gave him a different perspective on life, which almost made him lose the essence of living.

After returning to Japan, I lived like an empty shell. Living like an empty shell is not really living, no matter how many years it may go on. The heart and flesh of an empty shell give birth to nothing more than the life of an empty shell. (Murakami, 1997, p. 102)

Even though Lieutenant Mamiya experienced a gruesome experience inside the well, the blinding light made him experience something otherworldly, which is unfathomable for him even after forty years. In search of a similar experience, Toru found a dried-up well near his house and occasionally visited it to clear out his mind. Initially, he relived all his memories vividly in the well, and eventually, it became his safe space. Whenever he needed to calm himself, he visited the well to find solace. The silence envelops him and offers comfort for his pains. Mr Honda shares a philosophical sentence with Toru and his wife that holds a deeper meaning for the life that Toru is about to face:

When you're supposed to go up, find the highest tower and climb to the top. When you're supposed to go down, find the deepest well and go down to the bottom. When there's no flow, stay still. If you resist the flow, everything dries up. If everything dries up, the world is in darkness. (Murakami, 1997, p. 31)

This quote serves as a pivotal point of foreshadowing the two contrasting images of the well and tower, where the tower offers clarity of the future, and the well encourages introspection on the past by immersing oneself in oblivion. These words keep resonating with Toru as he encounters different situations and people in his life. "Down in the pitch blackness at the bottom of the well, though, far removed from reality, the memory came back to life with searing vividness" (Murakami, 1997, p. 159). Toru found solace in the solitude of the well. When he is inside the well, time doesn't seem to pass like it does for those outside it. This allows him to stay in the well for hours without being suspected

of his absence from the outside world. Toru meets people through the well, where he travels to different spaces without physically moving there, giving him the advantage of viewing certain situations from a different perspective. The well was no longer just a place to think for him, but it had become part of him. Over time, he began to feel as though he was part of the well, as he says it is one of the places where he can truly be himself. The struggle of being a house husband without a job, trying to find his missing cat, and then his missing wife took a toll on him. The journey of discovering why his wife left him on a random workday without any warning marks the beginning of it all. The well acts as a part of Toru himself, where he is left all alone, and the only person who can understand him is himself. The well is seen as a place of redemption for him.

In one of the analyses of the well's importance in the novel, it is seen as part of the inner self rather than an outer entity. "Rather than emerging from the well and listening to the wind with its message of nihilistic despair, his true message seems to be to return to the well and find your mythic support within" (Dil, 2007, p. 76). The novel depicts lonely characters going on with their everyday lives. The characters do not conform to traditional cultural values; instead, they follow their own life choices, which is uncommon in the Japanese collectivist society. For example, here the husband Toru takes care of the household while the wife is the breadwinner, and the teenager drops out of school and does menial data collection jobs. Though they may seem like random, insignificant events but culturally, Japan as a society with strict conformity to excel in their lives takes priority. Anyone who strays away from this success path paved by society will be seen and treated as an outcast.

#### D. *Super Solo Culture*

*Ohitorisama*, known as "on your own," is a cultural phenomenon of Japan where individuals have embraced the act of doing things alone, including everyday errands, entertainment, and companionship. It is reflected in the works of Haruki Murakami, where his characters exhibit the traits of a postmodern hero of being an aloof loner who operates outside society, which remains an integral part of it. "The Ohitorisama trend is gaining momentum in Japan, reflecting a changing mindset where being single is not seen as a solitary state but rather an opportunity for self-discovery and contentment" (Koktail magazine, 2024). The cultural phenomenon has also been evident in popular culture, with many businesses capitalising on the trend by catering to the solo culture. Some cafés cater to those who prefer dining alone, limiting communication so they do not have to speak even when ordering food. "To be seen eating alone in the school or office cafeteria, they would eat in a bathroom stall. Appearing friendless was a no-no, leading to what became known as *benjo meshi* – taking a *toilet lunch*" (BBC, 2020). Here, the main character Toru searches for his missing cat Watanabe, named after his brother-in-law, where he encounters an eccentric teenager who becomes his friend and confidant. Later, his wife does not return from work. In search of his cat and wife, he discovers a dried-up well, which becomes a medium for him to connect with other eccentric characters who help him solve the puzzles in his life.

Murakami often captures the essence of the Japanese culture of *Ohitorisama* in his fictional works. This paper aims to highlight the involuntary isolation aspect of Japanese culture, where individuals are content with themselves and do not require a companion for daily life. "The Super Solo Culture is becoming deeply ingrained in the fabric of Japanese society, reflecting a shift towards a more inclusive and accepting mindset" (Koktail Magazine, 2024). The increase in introverted adults exemplifies those who consciously choose to avoid social gatherings to enjoy their own company. In contrast, people from a century ago were held back from the gatherings, medically, to be cured of illnesses they did not understand much about. The striking difference in the concept of isolation over the past century illustrates a social transformation, where people increasingly prioritise their individual needs over social obligations.

#### E. *American vs Japanese Culture*

Cross-cultural analysis, also known as holocultural analysis, is used in this paper to examine two cultures and explore their characteristics. Japanese and American cultures have minimal similarities culturally, which makes it challenging to compare them. This comparison allows us to recognise differences between cultures and explore them to find common ground. By comparing texts from different cultures, we can identify the underlying values, beliefs, and social norms that influence characters, plots, and themes. It helps us understand the variations and similarities among different societies. Americans and Japanese have different familial structures, often described as individualistic and collectivistic societies. These terms help us grasp the nuances of the societal values they share as a community. This also predates modern civilisation, where early agriculturists followed collectivistic lifestyles, relying on one another to improve society. Japanese island dwellers, who are vulnerable to multiple natural disasters, depend on their community to help them recover and return to normal life after adversity. This makes them a closely-knit society sharing common values and goals for their families to prosper.

The individualistic society has often originated from nomadic shepherds or explorers, particularly in the case of Americans, who have historically lived apart as a society and relied on their own survival. "In the United States, individualism became part of the core American ideology by the 19th century" (Lukes, 2025). American and European societies exemplify individualistic cultures, whereas the Japanese follow a collectivist society. These contrasting societies are examined to understand how shared values frame how one is liberated and the other is suffocated. It is also noted that "Cultural differences also influence the motivation to either stand out or fit in with the rest of the group" (Cherry, 2013). Some characteristics of an individualistic society include the emphasis on individual rights, freedoms, and self-expression; prioritisation of personal goals and achievements; independence, self-reliance, and uniqueness; loose social bonds and a

focus on the nuclear family; as well as competition and achievement. These traits can be observed in many American fictional works centered on 'The American Dream,' where characters aspire to succeed in America. Some of the characteristics of a collectivist society include emphasis on group harmony, values of interdependence, loyalty, conformity to group norms, following social hierarchy, and respect. In the end, men or women, irrespective of their gender, aspire to the ultimate freedom to pursue their choices without any restrictions. Conforming oneself to a societal expectation only leads to unhappy individuals. We have come a long way in treating women's choices as an act of their freedom rather than rebellion to be more like men.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Isolation as a treatment and a personal choice for self-growth are compared and contrasted in this paper. This century has seen many medical and cultural advancements. While intellectual and social isolation have diminished over the past century, the mental agony once endured by women has now transformed into a form of solitude that is embraced by many. Although cultural differences exist between the collectivist Japanese society and the individualistic American society, this paper studied a new perspective on isolation. The paper analysed two literary texts that depicted the rest cure and solo culture from two different cultures. Gender bias plays a significant role in the rest cure, where women and men experience different aspects of depression, such as PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) in men and Postpartum Depression in women. While depressed men are prescribed the active "West cure," involving being one with nature and its wildness, women underwent the restrictive "rest cure," confined to bed, isolated from social contact, and force-fed under strict medical supervision. Mental health awareness has come a long way since "Solo culture", where people voluntarily choose to be alone as their lifestyle choice. Women find solo culture liberating, enabling them to pursue their personal and professional lives together without sacrificing one for another. The paper analysed the two phenomena with two fictional works, which provided insights into the cultural and societal differences. The future scope of research can focus on the nuances of the cultural aspects in both these cultures.

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