

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* Exemplified Institutionalized Sexism Hindered the Creative Impulse of Women

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Abstract

A Room of One's Own is dedicated to an analysis of the patriarchal English society that has limited women's opportunity. Woolf reflects upon how men, the only gender allowed to keep their own money, have historically fed resources back in to the universities and like institutions and help them gain power in the first place, in contrast to the women's university. Woolf stretches back to Elizabethan times to give a fictional-historical example of sexism: Judith Shakespeare, imagined sister of William Shakespeare, leaves a tragic life of unrealized genius as society scorns her attempts to make something of her brilliant mind. Woolf traces such obstacles against women writers through modern day; beyond her main treatment of money and privacy. This article emphasizes women's creativity is hindered due to institutionalized sexism. The lack of money and privacy has prevented women from writing with genius in the past. Without money, women are slavishly dependent on men; without privacy, constant interruptions blocked their creativity. This article exemplifies the belief of Woolf, if female writers have their own space, their minds will be freed and their genius will blossom.

Institutionalized Sexism Hindered the Creative Impulse of Women

Feminist theme was dominant in Virginia Woolf's '*A Room of One's Own*' (1929). This text was a milestone in feminist literary criticism. In this particular essay she made her famous statement: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". In October 1928 Woolf presented lecture at Cambridge University's Newnham and Girton colleges from which the book originated. She separated women as objects of representation and women as authors of representation; she argued that a change in the forms of literature was essential because most literature had been formed by the outcome of men based on their own needs for their own uses. In the final chapter Woolf described about an Androgynous mind. Woolf suggested Colerige who addressed that a good writer should be Androgynous and stated that this fusion necessary to fertilize the mind in order to use all its faculties.

Woolf emphasized that the major reason for the marginal status of women largely depended on socio economic factors, such as poverty and lack of privacy. Throughout the essay she focused on one major point that a woman should have money and a room of her own if she is

to write fiction. Woolf firmly insisted upon the need of an inheritance which was the first major step towards equality and the privacy of one's own room could pave the way for creative genius to flourish without any sort of disturbance. She gave a historical argument that due to the lack of money and privacy women lost their chance to prove their creative ability in the past. Without financial support women were subjected to dependent on men and due to the lack of privacy her creativity was constantly disturbed, there was no chance for her to exhibit her talent. According to Woolf's argument a room of one's own would obviously provide time, space, and privacy for women so they could represent sublimity in their writing. During Woolf's age those luxuries were limited to women but Woolf was not only just concerned with a room alone. She used room as a symbol for many greater issues such as equal education employment and financial independence, each of which was a major reason for the multitude inequalities embedded within men and women.

Virginia Woolf was asked to deliver a lecture on women and fiction, she addressed her audience what she thought about the title might mean: what women are like; the fiction women write; the fiction written about women; or the collaboration of the three. However she felt that she could not conclude and bring out the truth on those subjects because controversial topics cannot derive the conclusive truth. "When a subject is highly controversial, one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one has hold"(Woolf, 38).

In the essay Woolf stressed about the importance of money and privacy. Due to the lack of material status women's creativity was drained within herself throughout the ages. The narrator wrote, "Intellectual freedom depends upon material things poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time"(22).She continued her essay by emphasizing that when the question about sex raised one cannot bring out the truth.

Woolf explained the critical fact by explaining how women were discriminated in the university through her fictional representation in the essay. When she entered the fictional Oxbridge, a beadle intercepted her and denied her that only scholars and fellows were allowed on the lawn and women were not allowed. The interruption disturbed her and made her to forget her thoughts but still she pondered for these great literary figures and she wanted to taste their writings and their contribution to literature so went to the library. An old man denied her at the entrance by telling her that women were not admitted without a fellow or a letter of introduction. Next she passed the chapel listened to the organ and musical instruments played by the congregation troop she wished to enter but she was reluctant that she will not be allowed inside. She described about the enormous wealth that had been used for building the university; the wealth came from the independent men. She described about the delicious food. "The partridges, many and various, came with all their retinue of sauces and salads, the sharp and the sweet, each in its order; their potatoes, thin as coins but not so hard; their sprouts, foliated as rosebuds but more succulent".(15)

Woolf entered the Fernham, the women's college where she had a mediocre dinner and the atmosphere of the college was very dull there was a complete contrast. She felt one could not "think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well"(17). The narrator and her friend

Seton condemned their mother for leaving their daughters very impoverished and lack of sufficient financial support. Only for the last forty years women have been allowed to keep their money which they earned; before that it was totally belonged to their husbands. Mrs. Seton had a penny of her own. For centuries before it was her husband's property. "Even if I could earn money, it is not a matter that interests me very greatly. I had better leave it to my husband" (60). It was an impossible task for Mrs. Seton and her mother to earn money, even if they earned they were not allowed to afford the money, the law had denied their right to possess their earnings. Woolf herself emphasized if women granted with the right of inheritance the discussion of the thesis topic would have been based on Archeology, Botny etc.

The narrator deeply analysed about the effect of poverty and wealth on the mind, male was subjected to enjoy prosperity while women were attuned to poverty and oppression. Wealth was recurrently mentioned as a primary element for ingredient creativity. Woolf described that men had a very few obstacles in their life. Generations of men both aristocratic enjoyed luxurious independent wealthy life but women were denied of those luxuries. The depiction of their mediocre dinner was a minor issue but through that Woolf represented of major inequalities which women had endured for centuries in the society and nature. Women were also tainted with child bearing and rearing. The narrator pointed out that such condition impaired the creative ability of women.

Virginia Woolf entered the British museum at London, she wrote in a paper placed on the table 'Women and fiction' to find the truth behind it various questions raised in her mind to bring out the "essential oil of truth."

- i) Why did men drink wine and women drink water?
- ii) Why was one sex prosperous and other so poor?
- iii) What effect does poverty have on fiction?
- iv) What condition is necessary for the creation of art?(22).

She searched answers for the questions. When she thought of female sex, not only doctor and biologists were attracted but also the Essayist and novelist. Woolf described men were interested to write about women but the writings of men about women was frivolous and facetious. She was exhausted by reading all those descriptions about women then she started to write about "women and poverty" she speculated a peculiar description when she thought about poverty of women.

condition in the middle ages of,
 Habits in the fiji islands of,
 Worshipped as Goddesses by,
 Weaker in moral sense than,....
 Mental moral and physical inferiority of(35).

Women were worshipped as Goddesses but in the real life they were underestimated treated as weaker beings. Woolf illustrated Samuel Butler's quote "wise men never say what they think of women" but Woolf concluded "wise men never say anything else apparently". To prove this she also gave some examples and explanations such as pope-"most women have no character at all", "La brugre-les femmes sont extremes-elles sont meillure soupieres queles hommes"(39) (women are good in character) both the Pope and La Bruyere were contemporaries but they were contradicting each other's idea. And also when there is question as to whether

women were capable of education or incapable? A Napoleonic view was that they were incapable but Dr. Johnson thought the opposite.

The next question raised by her was whether women have souls or not? Some savages suggested they have none others on the contrary worshiped women as half divine one. Some sages emphasized that they are shallower in the brain; others described that they were stronger in the conscious. Goethe privileged them; but Mussolini detested them. From all the above she concluded that the opinion of men upon women varied from person to person.

Woolf ridiculed a picture of professor Von x, who criticized women in his text entitled *The Mental, Moral, and physical inferiority of the Female Sex*. He represented all those writers who were underestimated the qualities of women downgraded them to be second rate. Woolf depicted her anger towards the professor by drawing number of circles on his face. The dominant tone of the professor proved the patriarchy that England had underwent. The power and money influenced him. When he insisted, about the inferiority of women, he was very much concerned about his superiority. This is the bestiality nature of human beings. Psychologically human beings had been noted for their dominance and superiority over other people. Woolf argued that human beings are bestowed with innate superiority-“ it may be wealth or rank , a straight nose, or the portrait of a grandfather by Romney- for there is no end to the pathetic devices of the human imagination- over other people”(66)Woolf did not blame men for the unequal treatment of women in the society. She recognized the violence patriarchy to universal human faults. Woolf illustrated women over the ages, served as mirror for men.

“Woolf says that society gives me chicken and coffee, bed and lodging, in return for a piece of paper (money) which was left to me by my aunt”(75). She then listed out few occupations that were open to women before 1918. As Woolf inherited five hundred pounds from her aunt she was financially comfortable so there was no need to hate men because through the help of money she was leading an independent life and there was no need for her to flatter any man. Woolf said that she found a new attitude towards men (the other half of the human race). Thus Woolf gave more explanation on money. Woolf thought that in hundred years the women will take part in all activities and exertions that were denied them.

Woolf considered history and historians who recorded facts to describe under what Condition women lived, not throughout the ages but in England in the time of Elizabeth. She was shocked that no woman represented her creativity in literature, not even a single woman contributed a single word for literature. Men wrote poetry such as songs and sonnet. So Woolf asked herself what was the condition of women during the Elizabethan Era and which condition she lived. Woolf compared fiction to a spider web though it was attached lightly it was attached to all the four corners of life. Then she illustrated about the horrible condition of marriage and how women were treated badly like ‘wife being beaten’ she referred to professor Trevelyan’s *History of England* “ the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents’ choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted upon the public opinion. Marriage was not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice, particularly in the chivalrous upper classes... betrothal often took place while one or both of the parties was in the cradle, and marriage when they were scarcely out of the nurses”(70)this was the situation of women during 1470s at Chaucer’s time.

The next reference to the condition of women dated after two hundred years later from Chaucer's time "It was still an exception for women of the upper class to choose their husbands, and when the husband had been assigned, he was lord and master"(70). The pathetic condition still exists in the society for instance in the outskirts of India still girl children are confined and got trapped in marriage without illuminating their knowledge through the fruit of education. Thus their creativity was crushed.

In real life women suffered a lot but they were viewed differently in imagination. A woman was a prominent being in imagination. Even in literature texts her role was glorified. She was given utter most importance. She was noted for her courage, intelligence, valiant and she was ambitious but it was a complete contrast to reality. In original life she was completely insignificant. She was demotivated her ambition was hampered she was subjected to be dependent and subordinate. She was not even accepted as half of the human race. "In fiction she donated the lives of kings and conquerors but in reality she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger"(63). Thus a woman was treated as prolific character in literature for instance the character of viola in Shakespeare's play Twelfth Night was illustrated with vitality and profundity she was noted for her self-confidence and adventurous personality. She showed herself to be ready-witted too. For example when she was enquired by Olivia to state her purpose of visit, Viola replied "I bring no over tune of war, no taxation of homage; I hold the olive in my hand; my words are full of peace, as matter"(24, Shakespeare). Thus Shakespeare's women characters are noted for their will and valiant but in reality during Elizabethan period women were not even allowed to take part in theatre activities, all those female characters of Shakespeare was presented by males on the stage. Men disguised as women and they represented the play. This was the real condition of women in Elizabethan period.

Woolf traced back to the prof. Trevelyan's work. She referred on to the chapter headings where she found occasionally an individual woman mentioned in it like Elizabeth or Mary, a queen or a great lady but there was not any description about middle class woman with brain and character took part in any one of the great movements. There was no existence of female characters in any collections of anecdotes. She never attempted to record her own life in a dairy. There was not even a play or poem about the real life existence of women during Elizabethan period. Woolf explored there was only a handful collection of letters which recorded scarcely about the condition of women.

Woolf was astonished by the fact that nothing was known about women before the eighteenth century, when she gave a glance at the book shelves she asked herself "Why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age. She was not sure of how women were educated; whether they were thought to write; whether they had sitting rooms to themselves. According to Prof Trevelyan they were married whether they liked it or not"(52).

Later she thought about the person, who declared that it was impossible for any women of past or present, to have the creative impulse and intelligence of Shakespeare "Cats do not go to heaven, women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare"(61). She accepted that it was an impossible aspect for any woman to have to write the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare because Shakespeare went to grammar school, where he learnt Latin, the elements

of grammar and logic, married a woman in the neighbourhood and secured fortune in London, as he had the taste for the theatre he wrote brilliant plays and he was acclaimed as master dramatist. He attained verisimilitude through his contribution to English Literature.

On the other hand Woolf introduced an imaginary character Judith Shakespeare sister of Shakespeare who remained at home and as adventurous, and as imaginative as Shakespeare was. She was not sent to school, and whenever she picked a book to read her parents told her to mind the stew. When she tried to write something in paper she had to hide it or set fire to them and before she was out of her teens she was betrothed to the son of a neighbourhood. When she begged to not to marry, she was beaten by her father. She went to London, for the taste for the theatre. When she said she wanted to act, men laughed at her. She was cheated by a man, got pregnant and killed herself on one winter's night. This was how Virginia Woolf thought of a woman life in Shakespeare's day.

Any woman born with a great gift of poetry in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, and half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty(56).

Even in the 19th century women writers such as George Eliot, George Sand, Currer Bell who wrote by using the name of a man. Thus a woman was not allowed to publicity this was the convention of the society. She quotes the lines of Mr. Oscar Browning that "The best woman was intellectually inferior to the worst man"(34). She concluded that in 19th century women were not encouraged to be an artist. Thus Woolf explored institutionalized sexism was the major cause for the depletion of aspiring female writers in the past.

Woolf argued that so far from the history women suffered a lot and they were not provided with equal opportunity, so that her intelligence was drained within herself. If women had been provided with privacy and independence, she would have proved herself. In this essay Woolf felt astonished when she surveyed the statics of women writers from the history. There were very few female writers emerged when compared to male writers. Then she surveyed various reasons behind the low statistical level of women writers. The denial of equal opportunity and personal space, the ridicule mockery by male writers, and the lack of familial or institutional support were not illustrated as issues but rather as conditions that asphyxiated aspiring female writers for centuries.

But for women, I thought, looking at the empty shelves, these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound proof room, was out the question, unless her parents were rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Such material difficulties were formidable; but much worse were the immaterial. The indifference of the world which Keats and

Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility (26).

In the essay Woolf also discussed about the everlasting female writers who made milestone in the Victorian Era through their dedication, they managed to overcome circumstantial obstacles and produced great works: Jane Austen, Charlotte, Emily Bronte and George Eliot. Yet even in the writings of Charlotte Bronte, whose novels were marked in the history of English Literature, Woolf remarked certain flaws, certain shrillness, that came out of the defensive ideological position from which she wrote.

Woolf also responded to the question of why she insisted about the importance of women's writing. As an avid reader, the overly masculine genres in writing disappointed her she encouraged the aspiring women writers to be themselves "Think of things in themselves"(50).

She emphasized that Judith Shakespeare still lives within all women, and that if women are provided with money and privacy she will be reborn.

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