

Feminist Spatial Concept and Strategy in *The Bell Jar* and “A Room of One’s Own”: Constructed Claustrophobia and Sense of Liberation

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Abstract

The academic discipline of “space” for women’s writing as a discrete area of literary studies is based on the notion that the experience of women, historically has been shaped by their gender and so women writers by definition are a group worthy of separate study. Their texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men. Women writers have long been interested in tracing the “woman space” in writing. This spatial ideology has been skilfully manipulated in the works of two radically influential minds in the history of feminism, Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf. Both of them in their specific works namely *The Bell Jar* and “A Room of One’s Own” respectively incorporate this spatial trope to highlight the subjugation and patriarchal oppression of women in the field of literary tradition. Their works are not a retrieval of submerged history, the works look at the existing history of women’s writing and women writers and the politics therein, to trace the evolution of a spatial construct. Therefore this paper attempts to project that both Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf strive to concretize the concept of “woman space” within the literary history as the depiction of “space” within a bell jar by Plath reinforces the age-old oppression and subjugation imposed upon women by the hegemonic discourse and in a little bit contrasting manner by using the concept of “space” within a room, Woolf successfully convinces her readers that every woman should embrace the sense of liberation within a room, more particularly within a “space” of her own.

Key Words: Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, woman space, patriarchy, oppression, subjugation, liberation.

In an essay entitled “Aristotle’s Sister”¹, Lawrence Lipking wonders how we have managed to uncover so many of Shakespeare’s Sister writers, yet so few of Aristotle’s Sister literary theorists. Tracing the history of a “woman’s poetics”, Lipking uncovers “some consistent patterns” among women writers and their “silence” about writing more specifically theory. If we can at least understand the nature of their “abandonment”, he suggests we might begin to give the daughter writer “a space of her own”.

Woman’s silence about writing which leads to their own spiritual independence however strikes us as involving something more than our historical silence about writing. It is not simply that male writers – literary or otherwise from Aristotle on through the neo

Aristotelians – have claimed writing as their space, but that the very notion of space has been foregrounded by a long tradition of men who deal in both the spatial concept of metaphysics and more recently, in its spatio-temporal deconstruction. When women write about space—whether it is Virginia Woolf seeking a “room of one’s own”, Elaine Showalter² identifying the historical space of women’s writing, or Julia Kristeva³ describing women’s experience more in terms of space than time—they envision themselves outside metaphysical tradition that feed the production of writing. The very label of “feminist writing” now attached to a variety of ideas, books and even academic courses, readily distinguishes itself from other forms of writing. It can be argued that this distinction is grounded in women’s different experience and conceptualization of space. It is not that women have not written with their creativity. It is rather that the spatial configurations fundamental to the production of writing are not at all the kinds of spaces occupied and described by women. As women now conspicuously enter the scene of writing, they are variously transforming its spatial contours.

Sylvia Plath’s path breaking novel *The Bell Jar*⁴ offers a brilliant evocation of the oppressive atmosphere experienced by the American women of the 1950’s, where the concept of ‘space’ is being used to generate the sense of claustrophobic entrapment within a bell jar whereas in “A Room of One’s Own”⁵ Virginia Woolf discusses the constructing procedure of the domestic spatial ideology, leading towards the sense of liberation. Plath’s novel shows how the oppression had soul destroying effect on the ambitious, high minded, young women like Esther Greenwood, the protagonist of the novel. Plath brilliantly selects the title of her novel, *The Bell Jar*, in order to depict the essence of claustrophobia and suffocation within a closed space. It is this bell jar which also chokes Sylvia Plath to death because the era was still not ripe enough for setting up a different ideological stance. Putting Plath’s concept of “space” in an absolute contrast, Virginia Woolf not only marks the importance of the financial support, but also advocates the necessity of the “space” for a woman within a locked room. However, according to our analysis, the spatial construction is often the product of the conceptualized gender consciousness. Consequently Woolf’s spatial concept and strategy designed for the female writers need to some extent revision. That is only when the female learn to face, not escape from, the social reality and living space can they sufficiently achieve the literary creation.

The Bell Jar is a highly distinctive and unusual book, which makes the 1950’s an era to be remembered. It gets inside of the mind of a brilliant young woman who cannot accept the constraints placed upon her by her time. The interior landscape of Esther’s mind is as startling, precise and unforgettable as the world outside. The bell jar itself as an obscure identity characterizes the struggle, i.e., the captive helplessly trapped within the smothering, stiff and unbreakable glass walls symbolic of the claustrophobic confinement within a closed space. Several critics view this as a symbol of the suffocating constraints of society that traps Sylvia Plath’s protagonist Esther Greenwood within this confined space. Another interesting perspective that the novel provides is that it is a representation of Esther’s mental suffocation, which is an effect of the settling depression upon her psyche that metamorphoses, the perception of the novel. The conceptualization of “space” within the fabric of the novel is being used by Plath in a completely negative sense representative of claustrophobia, suffocation and confinement.

In Virginia Woolf’s feminist essay “A Room of One’s Own”, Woolf argues that a woman must have money and a room of her own, if she is to write fiction of any merit. The essay was composed at a time (1928-1929) when she was simultaneously working on other

literary projects such as *Orlando*⁶ and *The Moths*⁷. In her essay Woolf recognized the necessity of the writer's financial independence to the birth of great writing, but she failed to discover the true relationship to great writing of another freedom; for just as economic freedom allows one to inhabit a physical space – a room of one's own – so does mental freedom allow one to inhabit one's own mind and body “incandescent and unimpeded”. Woolf seems to believe that the development and expression of creative genius hinges upon the mental freedom of the writer, and that the development of the mental freedom hinges upon the economic freedom of the writer. But after careful consideration of Woolf's essay and also of the recent trend in feminist criticism, one realizes that if women are to do anything with Woolf's words; if we are to act upon them – to write the next chapter in this great drama - we must take her argument a little further. We must propel it to its own conclusion to find that in fact both the freedom from economic independence and the freedom from fetters to the mind and body are conditions of the possibility of genius and its full expression; we must learn to move in: to inhabit and take possession of, not only a physical room, but the more abstract spaces of our minds and our bodies. It is only from this perspective in full possession of ourselves that we can find the unconsciousness of ourselves, the anonymity in which Woolf believes we must write.

In Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood, has constructed a “bell jar” in her mind. The novel portrays the emotional decay of an ordinary girl, the epitome of womanhood, living under an imaginary “bell jar” and struggling against the confinements upon her by both the society and her own self. The psychological study of the novel would be focused on the report as living in the “bell jar” and being reduced to a deadly suffocating object within the confinements of the glass-shell. Esther's sense of living in a “bell jar” of social pressure is the root cause of her psychological space between self and society, body and soul. As a bright unmarried woman of the 1950's, she is either expected to be a virgin, or destined for a marriage where husband dominates wife or likely to have a career of a secretary and most appreciatively all of the above. These social confinements have fragmented her existence in a dismembered society itself.

Plath's novel criticizes the jar-like contemporary society for its double standards, male-dominance and hypocrisy. The double sexual standard in 1950's America gave men a privilege of pre-marital sex; however denied women of the similar sexual expression that generated a definite sense of frustration that generated a definite sense of depression and frustration in them. Esther's childhood friend Buddy Willard, is the epitome of male hypocrisy of double standard. He is viewed as a “fine clean boy... a model person... so intelligent” by the typical contemporary women. However he is an “awful hypocrite” to act like a virgin while having had an affair with a hotel waitress.

Esther feels suffocated by these limitations of a double standard and sexual hypocrisy imposed on women. When her mother sends her the *Reader's Digest* article entitled “In Defence of Chastity”, she wonders at the idea of cultural hypocritical divisions in terms of gender roles presented in the article. It says that a man's world and emotions are different from that of a woman and could only be brought together through marriage. Esther does not accept the notion of two different worlds and gets disillusioned of the social elements. The depression and despair caused by such conservative social norms generate a gap between Esther's self and society, body and soul. A constant sense of living in an airless suffocating space of a jar-like society results in her desire for freedom that she earlier seeks in death and finally attains through a feminist revolt by shattering the world of this social “bell jar”.

In an absolute contrast to Plath's utilization of space within the framework of her novel which imposes a complete negative impact upon the psychology of the protagonist, Woolf's use of it in her essay "A Room of One's Own" in order to strengthen the notion of women freedom, resonates a positive vibe in society. It seems that the feminist author of "A Room of One's Own" will possibly denounce the prison-like family in its obstructing the female's development, especially the intellectual and creative one. However Woolf adopts a broad sense of the family's function: if the domestic life disintegrated, the whole socializing procedure would surely lose its function. So Woolf tries very hard to retain the domestic wisdom traditionally cultivated by women and emphasizes the training and moulding role played by the domestic life. In her mind, the profoundest problem of the traditional domestic training is that the dividing line between the two sexes is drawn in the wrong place. While thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the order and of the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer, Woolf manipulates such problem by suggesting a new condition for each female within the domestic realm: an annual income of five hundred pounds to prevent from financial problems and especially, "a room with a lock on the door". In other words, she optimistically believes that the female writers will undoubtedly create better works under these two external supports. Although the female's financial self-support has been the major issue since the early twentieth century, highlighting the effect of a self-owned space still psychologically and socially remains debatable.

In the 1970's and early 1980's linguists explored the idea of a gendered language. It was argued that woman's language was differential, passive and apologetic, while men's language was aggressive, imperative and declarative. Women's language was also characterized by indirectness, tentativeness and diffidence. This difference in men and women when it comes to the use of language was attributed to the unequal positions they occupied in society. With the arrival of post-structuralism on the critical scene, philosopher and critics such as Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray developed a notion of 'women's writing', 'écriture feminine'. Focusing on the language of women's writing they postulated a fluid non-linear, elliptical, part-mythic, mystic writing. 'Écriture feminine' works pre-dominantly to upset notion of language, form, narrative, order, and organization. "A Room of One's Own" sets Virginia Woolf's conception of a woman's sentence, modernism and feminism in relation. Woolf's technical experiments, such as her use stream-consciousness and the dislocation of grammatical structures highlight her modernism which undermines the linguistic, syntactical and metaphysical conventions of language and narrative. Therefore, opposing phallogocentric discourse, post-structuralist feminists exhort to what Cixous termed as "écriture feminine" as the inscription of female body and female difference in language and text. Accordingly viewing women's sexual difference as a source rather than a point of inferiority to men, Sylvia Plath in her novel *The Bell Jar*, rediscovers female experience and thus exhibits the productivity of feminine language.

All through the text of "A Room of One's Own", the narrator, mediating on the subject "Women and Fiction,"⁸ travels from the Oxbridge to British Museum, from the public restaurants to the room in her house. She attempts to search out some meaning with the aid of the change of locations. However she fails to find any final solution because she is unable to recognize the fact that the space is in whole constructed by thinking pattern of the dominant patriarchal knowledge. How can she discover the "pure" female status suitable for the topic, "Women and Fiction"? In fact meditating in the male space, what she constantly faces is

countless interruptions, e.g., the prohibition she meets while walking on the college turf or attempting to enter the college library. These interruptions not only physically influence her behaviour but, what is worse, also break in upon her thoughts. In a word a female cannot have consistent thoughts if they fail to follow the patriarchal recognition.

No wonder masculine system has until now required women to assume material continuity – of daily life and of the species – while men assume the function of discontinuity, discovery, change in all its forms, in essence, the superior, differentiating function. But in appropriating and objecting to such a kind of mediating process, women need not to stick to another vision totally refusing their continuity. Rather women should on the one hand face the masculine influence, and on the other hand manage to pursue a new feminist way out. From this aspect, Woolf does elaborate a precious perspective in recognizing the inter-operation of men and women, which is extraordinarily special in comparison with the radical feminist advocacy to exclude the other half of the human beings from the gender-stage.

The Bell Jar traces Esther's journey from within the jar to world without. Her sense of being enclosed within a "space" develops a definite urge for freedom that she seeks through death, because death for her is not the end but the beginning of a new life with an alternate identity of her own. Moreover she adopts a feminist revolt as another measure to attain liberty. Thus the novel explores an analysis of the protagonist's mental state- while living under an illusory bell jar – a constructed claustrophobia. Whereas Woolf stresses upon the idea that, since this world consists of both sexes, what women pursue should not be Woolf's exclusive room but Guiguet's room⁹, closed yet open at the same time. It is closed because of its insisting on women's privacy; open, because of its guaranteeing their participation in social lives, either inside or outside of the domestic field. Only when they are able to claim a new exercising space for their latitude can they bring their ability and intelligence into full play. Then there will be a constant repositioning between dominant and muted, hegemonic and oppositional, central and colonial, so that a woman may be described as (ambiguously) non hegemonic or, with equal justice or less drama, as (ambiguously) hegemonic if her race, class and sexuality are dominant. Only when we get rid of the confinement of the locked room can we envision this oscillating phenomenon in "A Room of One's Own". Therefore, the journey should start from the bell jar, breaking the shackles of patriarchal domination and end in a room of one's own, realising the true essence of being.

Notes

¹"Aristotle's Sister" is an essay by Lawrence Lipking.

²Elaine Showalter is an American literary critic, feminist and writer on cultural and social issues. She is the founder of feminist literary criticism in United States academia and develops the concept of gynocriticism.

³Julia Kristeva is a Bulgarian French philosopher, literary critic, psychoanalyst and feminist.

⁴*The Bell Jar* is the only novel by American writer and poet, feminist Sylvia Plath, written in the year 1963.

⁵"A Room of One's Own" is an extended essay by Virginia Woolf first published on 24th October 1929.

⁶*Orlando* is a novel by Virginia Woolf first published on 11th October 1928.

⁷*The Moth* is a highly acclaimed collection of twenty-eight essays, sketches and short stories by Virginia Woolf, originally published in the year 1942.

⁸“Women and Fiction” is the primary name of Virginia Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own” published in the year 1929.

⁹Guiguet’s room is the room of Jean Guiguet, which indicates that Woolf’s “room” is a symbol of her autonomy.

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