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Virginia Woolf's Contribution to Feminist Discourse: Re-reading of *A Room of One's Own*

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Abstract

Feminist literary criticism is a component of the discourse of New feminism that emerged in Europe and America in late 1960's to resurrect political and social concerns associated with the actual participation of women in Western culture. It examines the male-dominated canon in order to comprehend how males have manipulated culture to further their dominance over women. Feminist approach to literature, like Marxist criticism, is a part of a larger set of social perceptions. It investigates the connections between women's representation in literature and social and historical issues such as sexuality and the family, hierarchies, patriarchy, and law. Feminist literary criticism offers fresh interpretations of literature by re-evaluating the literary works of both men and women. Feminist discourse encompasses a wide range of ideas, theories, and discussions related to gender equality, women's rights, and the social, political, and economic challenges faced by women. Virginia Woolf emerged as one of the most distinguished critics of the twentieth century, and undoubtedly as the greatest woman critic of all centuries in English literature. Her works and concepts have had a considerable influence on feminist discourse and are still researched and discussed in relation to feminism. The present paper aims to offer a comprehensive and insightful analysis of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, shedding light on its enduring significance in feminist discourse, literary criticism, and the ongoing fight for gender equality.

Keywords: Feminist discourse, radical, discrimination, cultural structures, ideology, gender politics, advocacy, androgynous, patriarchy, femininity

Introduction

Feminism is an interdisciplinary approach to concerns of justice and equality based on sex, gender, and sexuality as understood via social theories and political engagement. It has evolved over time from a critical analysis of gender inequity to a more comprehensive consideration of the social and performative constructions of gender and sexuality. The radical agenda of western liberal society has given rise to the most ardent advocates of feminism. It is a phrase that originated as women began to question their lower status and demand amelioration in their social standing. Feminisms of all sorts call for alterations to the existing social, political, and cultural structures. The basic yearning is to reduce and eventually overcome multiple discrimination against women. The expression first gained momentum during the early twentieth-century battles for women's suffrage in Western nations. The injustice to women, the feminist perspective broadly views, emanate from the biases against them on the basis of sex in political, economic, legal, and cultural fields. Every culture has ingrained these prejudices. Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, feminist ideology with all of its internal variations continues to expose how women are considered as the 'weaker sex'. The new feminism that arose in Europe and America in the late 1960s sought to resurrect political and social issues related to women's actual participation in western culture. Feminist literary criticism is a component of this debate.

Virginia Woolf emerged as the main spokesperson for the cause of women. She has been hailed as the pioneer of feminist awareness. Most of Virginia Woolf's novels, short stories, and critical essays deal with sex, gender, and feminism. She elaborately articulates her ideas on issues concerned with women in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The book examines male power and the injustice associated with its workings. This is one of the most

influential feminist texts of the twentieth century. It is referred to as a significant precursor to a form of feminine declaration and independence and is regarded as the earliest manifesto of the modern feminist movement. It originated from two expanded and revised lectures that Woolf delivered in October 1928 at Cambridge's University's Girton and Newnham College. The book has become a classic in its field and is now acclaimed as the feminist Bible that upholds the role of women. This essay was written by Woolf with an emphasis on female authors and the economic, educational, and cultural disabilities that have hindered women from realizing their creative potentials.

A Room of One's Own explores the history of women writers as well as the psychological, societal, economic, and other barriers that have thwarted women from consistently producing literary works. It offers tales of the female writers' emerging generation in a primarily male tradition. Woolf has provided women with a liberal perspective of the awakening of consciousness. She aimed to make people aware of the fresh possibilities for personal fulfillment. The book is a rebuttal to 'gender feminists', who appeal to women as being genetically defined. Women, according to gender feminists, are victimized and oppressed just because they are women, and the only recourse is to engage in a common political struggle, the struggle for power.

Virginia Woolf is a feminist whose exploration of the feminine consciousness and the inner world of women is not an end in itself, but a means towards an all-encompassing sense of human identity that can be achieved through psychic equilibrium. She in *A Room of One's Own* explores the issue of women's actual liberation, which could lead to new expectations in personal relationships. She is emphasizing the necessity for women to be independent in social, political, economic, and academic spheres by eradicating all forms of gender prejudice. Allen Pippett aptly observes:

That anything less than the utmost was expected of her as an artist, on the grounds that she as a woman, she flew into a fury. She was prepared to do battle for other women, to, if she suspected the slightest snub, often to their surprise and embarrassment if circumstances had made them less sensitive than she to any hint of masculine condescension, any implied to woman as a sex (Pippett 258).

Virginia Woolf, in her works, is painfully aware of the subtle conditioning that centuries old gender politics has done to the minds of men and women. As a woman writer during the Victorian era in England, Virginia Woolf experienced oppression since women's intellect was unquestionably marginalized by the patriarchal society. Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* questions how the space of women in literature is so limited and marginalized. It begins with a question:

But you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction – what has that got to do with a room of one's own? I will try to explain. When you asked me to speak about women and fiction I sat down on the banks of a river and began to wonder what the words meant (Woolf 3).

Woolf blends truth and imagination, offering a foundation for her ideas as well as the mythical or fictitious state of the

three Marys: "... call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please – it is not a matter of any importance. "She severely attacks the rigid Oxford system that treated women as second-class citizens. If a woman wants to create fiction, she needs to have money and a room of her own, she declares in the first chapter. *Omen and Fiction*, Woolf contends, is "a subject that raises all sorts of prejudices and passions" (Woolf 3). In order to illustrate the educational condition of those women at the time, she relates two distinct dinners served during her university visit—one at a women's college and the other at a men's. Here she successfully juxtaposes the two roles and reveals the injustice and the lack of educational opportunities for women. At the women's college, she says, "Dinner was not good" (Woolf 16). It consisted of plain soup, beef, cabbage, and potatoes, followed by prunes and custard. The water jug, she says, was liberally passed. While the situation at the men's college was quite opposite. Here there was sole and partridges, "with all their retinue of sauces and salads," followed by a confection..."while the glasses had flushed yellow and flushed crimson..." what she describes as the "subtle subterranean glow of racial intercourse" (Woolf 8-9).

By bridging fiction and women, the book explores the perceived differences between genders. Woolf is forced to evaluate the key circumstances of producing an artwork when she considers the wealth of men and the poverty of women. Good food and drink, she suggests, appropriately accompany rational discourse and are emblematic of the material conditions that support education: "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well" (Woolf 20). The distinction between the two meals represents the disparity in educational opportunities between men and women historically. And these differences have a significant impact on the ability to create fiction: "We cannot have sofas and separate rooms. 'The amenities, she said, will have to wait" (Woolf 20).

Woolf describes that during the 16th century, the major cause of women's deplorable position was her economic dependence on men. Secondly, they lacked the freedom and opportunity to cultivate their creative abilities. She uses the example of an elderly woman named Mrs. Seton to support her position. Had she gone into business she could have saved two or three hundred thousand pounds. Then she could have been sitting at her ease and the subject of her discussion might have been Archaeology, Botany, Physics, Mathematics, Astronomy and Geography. Virginia Woolf discusses the inevitable suffering that was the lot of women born gifted and intelligent. In all previous eras, including Woolf's own, women had very few choices outside of marriage and motherhood. She keeps exposing the appalling circumstances women had to face:

how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other and of the effect of tradition and of lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer (Woolf 22).

As the closed elite system is scrutinized throughout her discussion of her trip to the British Museum, various issues are brought up. Women were discouraged and prohibited from learning, working, voting, and owning property. Males were free to follow their aspirations and ambitions, while women were continually reminded of their prescribed 'roles.

Men's books about women, in Woolf's perspective, are at best non-scientific. They seem to be written "in the red light of emotion rather than the white light of truth" (Woolf 30). Woolf suggests that everyone needs self-confidence to face the "arduous, difficult, perpetual struggle" (Woolf 33), that is life. And one way to gain self-confidence is by believing that you are superior to others. The professors are more worried about their own superiority, which has been maintained throughout time by the perspective of the other sex, than they are about the inferiority of women. She says:

Women have served all the centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle...The looking glass vision is of supreme importance because it charges the vitality; it stimulates the nervous system. Take it away and man may die (Woolf 33-35).

Woolf looks into the status of women in the 16th and 17th centuries and the barriers that prevented them from expressing themselves. She holds that women differ from males in both their social history and their intrinsic makeup, and that each of these distinctions has had a significant impact on the advancement of women's literature. Joan Bennett observes:

She brought to the feminist cause something much more interesting and profound than an advocacy of equal rights. It was her real contribution to unveil the essential quality of female experience where it differs from the male (Bennett 76).

Virginia Woolf believed that a large part of the lassitude of women was due to paternal domination. She saw the position of women in the darkest possible light. Everyone knew the facts, and she repeatedly saw them as evidence that women's conditions have historically and continue to exist in conditions not much better than slavery. She berated the traditional culture she had inherited for remaining stuck in half-civilized savagery and for perpetuating an eternity of dominance on the one hand and servility on the other. Morris Beja remarks:

Woolf clarifies how sexism and its concomitant behavior can provide a foundation for either heroism (which can be admirable) or fascism (which can be deplorable). By assuming a subordinate role and invariably (without reciprocation) mirroring a man as being twice his actual size, a woman may consciously or unconsciously encourage him to take actions involving risk (Beja 19-20).

In order to understand why Jane Austen, Emily, Charlotte, and George Eliot, four of the most influential female writers of the 19th century, chose to write novels rather than poetry. And connects this to the circumstances of their writing in the "common sitting room" (Woolf 108) and the reasons why none of them could have written "War and Peace"? She thinks that this is because of the effect of poverty and chastity on female creativity. R. Brimley Johnson aptly asserts:

The woman novelist shared the problems common to the practitioners of her art, as well as inheriting problems peculiar to her sex. Women writers had always given undue weight to masculine claims, Virginia Woolf believed. Either they had tried to write exactly as men write, to adopt a style essentially foreign to them, or they had tried to write as men expect women to write (Johnson 275).

Woolf focuses upon transition from womanhood to personhood. She asserts that women who are overtly aware of their sex write weaker literature. It's because consciousness stands in the way of them experiencing art. It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of his/her sex. She didn't have a name for the ideal state she was after at the time; she termed it the 'androgynous mind'. She is referring to a mind, a luminous as it is rare, in which masculine and feminine elements unite in perfect harmony. According to the androgynous perspective, an artist's goal is to express themselves as more than just a male or female. Instead, the objective is to function as completely as possible as a whole human being. Carol Merli asserts:

Virginia Woolf's feminism contributed something essential to her artistic development. It enriched her fiction with a social and psychological metaphor with had it provided a necessary link the world (Merli 2).

Woolf insists that the most important consideration in relationships between the sexes is not one of rights in the public sense, but of psychological acceptance. According to Woolf, the cosmos serves as the setting for an ongoing struggle between opposites that approximately correspond to masculine and feminine principles. Her main concern was to find the ways of reconciling the warring opposites. She desired gender equality as a pragmatic feminist, a dynamic equilibrium between the two halves of humanity that would result in social regeneration. She is dreaming of a world there would be no discrimination on the basis of sex. Her idea of an androgynous intellect incorporates in it her aspect of femininity. It does not imply sterility or barrenness, but rather an acceptance of the otherness of the different. She has a cultural vision transcending the limitations of patriarchal culture. Michele Barrett remarks:

Virginia Woolf's critical essays offer us an unparalleled account of the development of women's writing, perspective discussion of her predecessors and contemporaries, and a pertinent insistence on the material conditions, which have structured women's consciousness (Barrett 36).

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, envisions a society free from sex-based prejudices. Her idea of an androgynous intellect incorporates her feminine side. It does not imply sterility or barrenness, but rather an acceptance of the otherness of the other. She possesses a cultural vision that transcends the confines of patriarchal civilization. But, in her works, she is painfully aware of the subtle conditioning that centuries-old gender politics has done to the minds of men and women. Woolf explains the core notion of enabling a woman to live her femininity and learning to let others live. She wishes to convey that human, particularly women, are endowed with a wide range of

potentials, some of which are realized and many of which will never be realized. However, people whose potential is not realized are just as valuable socially, if not more so, than the fortunate ones. As a result, social justice necessitates that people be respected for their potential, whether realized or unrealized. Later generations of feminist authors have drawn inspiration from Woolf's words and concepts. Her emphasis on women's empowerment, the importance of women's voices, and the need for equality have resonated with feminist authors. Numerous feminist writers have interacted with Woolf's works, using her concepts to investigate modern feminist challenges and further the discourse on gender and equality. Virginia Woolf's contributions to feminist discourse come from her in-depth study of women's lives, criticism of patriarchal institutions, and initiatives to broaden and challenge conventional gender roles. Her writings continue to inspire and influence feminist thinking, making her a key figure in the history of feminism.

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