



Women's Need for Space and Independence in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is a pioneering feminist essay that highlights the social, economic, and cultural barriers faced by women writers. Through her lectures at Cambridge, Woolf stresses that for women to achieve literary excellence, they need financial independence and a private space for creative work, a "room of their own." The essay explores historical oppression, limited educational opportunities, and patriarchal restrictions that prohibited women from fully comprehending their potential. Using the symbolic figure of Judith Shakespeare, Woolf exemplifies how gender restraints silenced talented women throughout history. She also presents the concept of the androgynous mind, advocating for a stability of male and female perspectives in literature. The essay critiques the male-dominated literary norm while encouraging women to proclaim their intellectual and creative freedom. *A Room of One's Own* remains a landmark text in feminist thought, emphasizing that talent alone is deficient without social, personal, and economic autonomy.

Keywords: Feminism, women writers, creativity, financial independence, patriarchy, androgynous mind, literary freedom, gender equality.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), a Victorian writer boldly, effectively and strongly asserted that a woman must have "money and a room of her own" for her to achieve in life. Among the writers whose views have turned the world upside down, Virginia Woolf also unconsciously grouped herself as one among the "the world changers". Virginia Woolf named as Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on January 25, 1882, in London. She was an Englishwoman, and an ardent proponent of feminism. She was one of the most skillful and influential writers of the early twentieth century. She had a thorny and troubled life, perhaps more than is specified directly in most of her writing. Woolf was the child of Victorian Era,



although she lived the major portion of her life in the twentieth century. Woolf was a rational being. She was always able to repress her feelings and this was characteristic of her being brought up in an atmosphere of the Victorian Age. She possessed a likable attitude, sincerity in her looks and responsibility in her behaviour. Daniel Albright claims, "Who am I? What am I? What is life? These are the incessant questions that form and disperse throughout Virginia Woolf's work" (qtd. in Bloom 113).

The Victorian woman was often looked upon as the "angel" in the house. She was labelled as the ideal woman. Men dominated the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest. They played a major role in the family as well as in the society whereas women were passive, submissive, emotional, selfless and dependent. Thus, men adopted their principles controlled by their mind or intellectual strength, to dominate society and control women. The rules laid by society for women were made known to them from their childhood either by their parents or by the society. Women living in such an environment made some feminists realize their life being close to slavery. Feminists and suffragists viewed their campaign as the best way to end the sexual discrimination against women. If women had decided to fight against the oppression of men, then they have to dive deep into the ocean of life to get the root of the problem and women writers like Virginia Woolf succeeded in uprooting it. Woolf once said that "I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity" (Varshney 81).

Woolf has much to say about society and the post-war changes, but a steady underlying theme in her works is feminism, the roles of women of the time period and their seeming insignificance. She narrates about the women of that era claiming that within the constraints of their social roles their lives are trivial. She is best known for her writings between World War I and World War II including the 1922 essay, *A Room of One's Own*, and novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Orlando*. Behzad Pourgharib writes:

Victorian values never ceased to haunt Virginia who found herself endlessly fighting a battle against them, though she herself was not certain about the depths into which they had entered her own psyche. She was more concerned about the women of her own generation who had their origin in Victorian society, had grown up resenting it, but had found themselves unable to sever their ties categorically and had finally won their freedom. . . significant period for women who were called upon to make certain readjustments in their inner lives and outlook in relation to their emancipation. (Pourgharib 152)

Woolf feels that a woman cannot be herself in an exclusively masculine society, as laws are framed by men and a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view. The cruel treatment of women in the society is a known fact but no one bothers to bring a good solution to it. Woolf feels that men must be having a fear that their position will be taken by the female whom according to them is the weaker sex. This message is clearly pointed out by Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf was against the society's beliefs and views. Thus, she alerted women through her voice to notice the difference of opinion between genders.

A Room of One's Own is based on lectures Woolf delivered at Newnham and Girton Colleges (Cambridge University). It presents the discrimination of women in a humorous style. She strongly sensed that the treatment towards women was becoming worse day by day. Woolf used her leadership and literary talent to fight for women's rights, and to bring justice to the unfair obstacles women were challenged with. She took writing as her powerful weapon to improve the conditions of women. According to Woolf women must possess if not demand for a room of their own and have a mind to think and decide of their own.

Woolf takes an opportunity to show that the gender roles are not biological but societal. The difference in the sex is twisted by the society. The society has made man as the dominant sex and women as an inferior one. Gender can be said as a concept imposed on people who live in the society. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) explains how Woolf was requested to deliver a lecture on "women and fiction". It was a compilation of lectures Woolf gave at Cambridge on the topic of women and fiction. In this slim volume she argues that talented female writers face the two obstacles that are social inferiority and lack of economic independence.

Woolf focused on the essential point that a female woman writer, in order to write fiction, needs an allowance of at least £500 a year as well as a private room. Anne Fernald says that Woolf unwraps *A Room*

of *One's Own* with an autobiographical anecdote. It is an anecdote which highlights the reader's attention on Woolf's idea on the subject of women and fiction, not on herself. She critiques the literary canon and patriarchal society that limited women's creativity. She appeals to her mood, her opinion, her own knowledge, inspecting received opinions against the text and herself. Thus, there is a sense of literature being open to anyone who is willing to do that kind of rigorous thinking. This thinking is not based on any one's education or any system.

Woolf feels that this essay should be taken very personally by women students. Regarding Woolf's adoption of the narrator, Anne Ferald says, "Mary Beton is a less competent researcher than Woolf, who is thus able to stand between readers (especially undergraduates, most especially women undergraduates) and Virginia Woolf, the famous author and critic . . ." (176). Woolf dramatizes Mary Beton's complexities as a succession of disruptions and disturbances, each of which offers the readers a replica for dealing with, adjusting, and even achieving from the interruptions and distractions in her own life.

There are many characters brought by the writer. Woolf writes, "Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please." (Woolf 2). Mary Seton is a student at Femham College and friend of the narrator's aunt. Judith Shakespeare is the imagined sister of William Shakespeare. Unable to gain access to the male stage of Elizabethan England, or obtain any formal education, Judith would have been forced to marry and abandoned her literary gifts. Mary Carmichael is a fictitious novelist. Mr. A is an imagined author. With all these characters, Woolf is able to express her strong viewpoints on the liberation and equality of women.

Woolf's main theme deals with women's rights. In almost every direction, she realized women were not allowed to be independent. She sharply and desperately wanted the right for women to write of her own and if a woman wants to write, she needs a room and before all this, she needs education. The anguish she must have felt at not having that right must have tormented her. A woman must have enough independence to provide for herself and realize her dreams. Woolf was a very brave and strong woman and therefore she deserves respect and independence. She lends her literary skills to open the doors for all the voiceless women. Literature requires someone to listen and understand. Her work was more of an outcry to the unfairness, not just her own, but for all women.

Women should have something of their own. Woolf feels that a modern woman has to work hard if she aims to be equal with man and achieve the same status like him. The first step she can begin is through education. Education is the greatest weapon to achieve status in the society. However, it was denied to women in the early age now women have started gaining education. Only when women succeed to bring changes on the social and cultural levels they can win the match, which her former generation has, began with men. There would emerge a new society, a unique world for women. Harrison highlights "an engaging analysis of the ways in which, as Woolf said, 'books continue each other'" (qtd. in Pingatore 418).

Woolf opens our eyes to the new sources of delight, new hope, new world and new strength and happiness. Alison Booth highlights Woolf's views,

The individual author's claims to originality should be waived, especially as women authors recognize the sufferings they have in common: "For masterpieces . . . are the outcome of many years of thinking in common . . . so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. (Booth 9-10)

Woolf boldly states that a woman should have a position in the society and she should not be dictated by men about how she should write fiction. The literature should be accessible to everyone, regardless their gender, because the objective reality of the world is neither male nor female. The greatest writers are above all gender. It is incurable if anyone writes keeping their sex in their mind. The readers must have realized it through Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* in which she has stated that a difference between man and women is only a social construct and it can be changed. Mary M. Childers points out:

If Virginia Woolf were one of those continuing presence the speaker of *A Room of One's Own* announces "true poets" to be, she would still be hovering around us now, intrigued by how her writing has been discussed by feminists in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s.

It would delight and maybe also frighten her that she is referred to, even jokingly, as the matron saint of feminism. (Childers 61)

Woolf has the quality to motivate her readers. Through her essay, *A Room of One's Own* She addresses the obstacles and prejudices encountered by women writers. It is a colossal suggestion for women's independence in creative endeavours. It is a long essay, which has become a great classic of its kind and is often called the "Feminist Bible" that defends the position of women. The arguments that Woolf puts across in this essay are now increasingly relevant with the rise of feminism and therefore can be used in a critical analysis of any modern novel where women play a central role in both domestic and public affairs. From a purely examination point of view the feminist perspective is very important now. Woolf can be considered a champion of women's rights. She wrote in such a way that promoted the need of women to have more freedom and more changes to earn their own income.

This essay gives the readers a chance to identify the truth about women. Woolf presents the essay in a different way as if she is the guide and is explaining and providing information to tourists. It can also be assumed as if the reader is alongside her in her research, pondering her musings and wondering at her declarations. In this essay she gives a vision of woman's place in literary history. She brings the condition of women by laying bare before us how women are treated in the society. Woolf invents the character of Mary and explains to the readers to name her creation, which pleases them because her creation can be anyone in the society. The problems faced by her character may or must have taken place in the society. Woolf has made her an average woman who was to represent the whole of all women. Woolf makes her character to encounter various situations through which she discovers her own divergence as a woman as well as alerts women in the society. The narrator Mary Beton is portrayed as a young woman living in the city named Oxbridge, which is close to a University.

Woolf shows how the narrator is first seen sent off the lawn by a Beadle as he found her strolling around the grounds. The reason for his behaviour is that she is a woman and therefore she is not supposed to go there. Next, when she enters the library, she again faces the problem because of her sex. She is not admitted and is asked to be accompanied by a Fellow of the college or need to have a letter of introduction. Woolf succeeds in creating her imaginable character. She wants her readers to get inspiration from Mary Beton. Woolf has created her character as young and unmarried. Woolf feels her that she is lucky enough to have a "room" and "money" of her own, namely the legacy of her aunt of five hundred pounds a year. She relied on an inheritance from her aunt because of only one reason that "[she] share[d] her name". She assures women saying that a unique world can be created where they can speak highly of being born as a woman. A room and money will make her independent and will give her all possible freedom throughout her life. Lucio P.Ruotolo asserts, "Woolf's evolving aesthetics encompass both existentialist and anarchist presumptions" . . . is to be "open to life . . . open to an aesthetic of disjunction situated at the heart of human interplay" (DeKoven, Interrupted Moment 275). Dorothy J. Hale gives an explanation of why women will be able to write better novels with a room of their own and five hundred pounds a year. In a statement given by Woolf's in *A Room of One's Own*. She says,

Women will have social power and material independence, their lives will have public significance and consequence. . . their lives will be written down-in public registers, in biographies, in histories, in newspapers, and in literature. Material changes will also provide women with the privacy and leisure time needed for writing, relieving them from the women's work that is never done, and unmooring the traditional patriarchic conceptions of the social roles available to women: wife, mother, daughter, spinster, prostitute, angel in the house. (567)

Josette Feral says that in the Women's Experimental Theatre trilogy women embark on the expedition of investigation in vagueness, as women without names, trying to seek out their identities in the enveloping shadows of their husbands and children. Only men have a name, while women remain in the shade of his name, in a pre-name/first-name limbo. First names of women, daughters, mothers, which fade away into the silence where "Women have lost or rejected all social identity and are no longer anything more than a voice" (557). Many men in the present and most, if not all, in the past have considered



themselves of obvious high calibre and as the undisputed dominant ruler over women. Yet in the midst of the 21st century, there came a radical change, which occurred merely within the last two centuries because from a homemaker they became a much stronger and independent sex. Through historical struggle women in the past faced persecution and insolence, thus they started fighting for small rights. This led to a social revolution thereby resulting in a drastic change in their life. Lack of freedom of speech, fight for the old customs and laws is holding many nations back socially and economically. Woolf challenges the patriarchal system that gives a man full freedom to select any livelihood as he desires, but often requires a woman to live her life in full support of his inventiveness instead of opting her own path.

Woolf's novels, essays and articles had furthered the feminist movement. Her influence to feminism can be seen from her literary works. *A Room of One's Own* and *Professions for Women* highlight the needs of women in the society and Woolf's craftiness in moulding the female gender in order to throw away the masquerade, which was forced by men. It also instructs them to take a strong role confidently. Christy L. Burns records that in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf urges women to write, to give themselves a voice. She says:

Woolf is still caught up in consideration of how one can constitute an identity (of one's "own") in a world determined by economic constraints and often degrading representations of women . . . women who have been excluded from the male literary tradition might both participate in and resist that tradition and the expectations of their unworthiness. (Burns 346)

Woolf's talent in the art of writing became a means for her views to be heard including feminism, which has influenced many people. One cannot live by the past. One cannot foretell the future, all one can do is live today. Woolf brings out the issues and themes throughout her works. The age in which Woolf lived made her to take such themes and found expressions in her writings. The reader's thoughts travel on thinking about the struggle to be free spiritually and physically within the restraints of society. This is true with the theme which Woolf has chosen to focus on the true life of women. It shows how one has to start that is, to take on one's own personal identity. Anne Ferald reveals that in *A Room of One's Own*

The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of your writing?, and in To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe continues to hear Charles Tansley's 'Women can't paint, can't write' . . . Thus, in "Professions for Women" Woolf does not kill the patriarchal father, but the Angel in the House, patriarchy's image of what woman should be. One has to cease believing in sexist and racist axioms before rising to fight against them. (184)

Woolf sharply and desperately wanted the right for women to write of her own and if a woman wants to write she needs a room and before all this she needs education. The anguish she must have felt at not having that right must have tormented her. A woman must have enough independence to provide for herself and realize her dreams. Woolf was a very brave and strong woman and therefore she deserves respect and independence. She lends her literary skills to open the doors for all the voiceless women. Literature requires someone to listen and understand. Her work was more of an outcry to the unfairness, not just her own, but for all women. Women should have something of their own. Woolf's essay is a call for equality in literature. She stresses that talent alone is not enough; women need social, economic, and intellectual support. Hence, *A Room of One's Own* remains a introductory feminist text advocating women's autonomy and creative freedom.



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