

# Feminist concern in Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's own

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Feminism in general is a term that is used to describe political, cultural and economic movements. It aims at establishing more rights and legal protection for women. It does not have a single fundamental definition as the British author and critic Rebecca West remarks;

*I only know that other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a door mat or prostitute.*<sup>1</sup>

Also, each writer establishes his/her own independent definition according to his/her own experience. For example, in Estelle Freedman's, view the emphasis is on the intellectual background.

*"Feminism is a social movement that try to achieve political equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies".*<sup>2</sup>

Depending on her situation and political stand point Bara Smith affirms that:

*"Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement".*<sup>3</sup>

Smith is a Feminist, who played a significant role in building and sustaining Black Feminism in the United States, which is an organization emphasizing the intersectionality of racial, gender heterosexist, and class oppression in the lives of blacks and other women of color. In literary criticism, feminism focuses on women's position in literature, both as writer and character, subject and object, perceiver and perceived. In politics, feminism refers to the approach which aims at having equal rights with men in all the fields of life. The term feminism first appeared in France in the 1880s, Great Britain in the 1890s, and in The United States in 1910. However, the real beginning of gender discrimination may have begun with the biblical narrative that places the blame for the fall of humanity on Eve, not Adam. This discrimination has continued throughout history. For example, the Ancient Greeks believed, as Aristotle asserted, that the male by nature is superior, the female inferior, the one rules, and the other is ruled.

Religious leaders also supported such gender discrimination. St. Thomas in his turn pronounced women to be an "incidental being". Roots of prejudice against women have long been embodied in the western culture until the early 1890s, when feminist criticism began to grow. During this time women gained the right to vote. Even before, Mary Wollstonecraft had authored *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* 1782. She urged women to stand up for their rights and not allow their male dominated society to define what it means to be a woman. Women themselves must take the lead and articulate who they are, and what role they can and will play in society. Most importantly, they must reject the patriarchal assumptions that women are inferior to men.

It is Elaine Showalter who divided women's modern literary development of feminism into three phases; the feminine phase [1840-1880], the Feminist phase [1880-1920], and The Female phase [1920-the present] .

Adeline Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882. She was an English novelist, feminist, essayist and writer of short stories. She has been regarded as one of the most foremost modernist literary figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From her father she had inherited a sharp critical sense. During war period, Woolf was a significant figure in London's literary society and a member of the Bloomsbury group. Their work deeply influenced literature, aesthetics, criticism and economics as well as modern attitudes towards feminism, pacifism, and servility. In most of her works, Woolf's female characters adapt themselves in order to satisfy the male defined role of women as art objects. Barbara Hill Rigney agrees that women in Woolf's novels split themselves into two selves, the male subject as surveyor and the female object as the surveyed. Because these characters maintain themselves to identify with the patriarchal society's image of a women by assuming the position of a male spectator towards themselves as female spectacle. They became themselves artists and art object at the same time. Rigney rightly believes that

*"the situation leads to these characters feeling of selflessness and loss of identity."*<sup>4</sup>

However, one can notice that Rigney is concerned about these characters, not as practical artists with practical artistic production but simply as situating themselves in the traditional position which the male society has ordained for them i.e. women as aesthetic objects or as the other devoid of critical consciousness.

Ann Barrett also examines Woolf's feminism in her novels *The Voyage Out*, and *To The Lighthouse* in relation to what she believes to be Woolf's radical critique of the patriarchal culture. She traces the development of the theme of the female artist in Woolf's two feminist works *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Barret states that when Woolf:

*"Intends the female artists to move outside the male culture, Woolf herself as an artist celebrates femininity against the patriarchal system."*<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, Barret is interested in the female artist as representing Virginia Woolf herself standing against the patriarchal; she is concerned with presenting the underline network or relation between the female artist and the patriarchal society.

Allen MacLaurin, nonetheless, is interested in studying the patterns of consciousness in Woolf's works in his book *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*. Drawing upon the difficult circumstances that Woolf had gone through, Allen MacLaurin's article presents several questions about the direct and indirect reasons that drive Woolf to be a feminist. Woolf had not a natural childhood. She lived in a house that contained the children of three marriages. She had three half brothers from her mother, a half sister from her father, and four siblings. Woolf had

*" Several breakdowns and subsequent recurring depressive periods "*<sup>6</sup>

Which were caused by the sexual abuse, she and her sister had been subjected to by their half-brothers. This sexual abuse was not the only factor that led to her breakdowns, also the death of her mother, and that of her half-sister Stella two years later. Throughout her life, Woolf had been plagued by periodic mood swings and associated illness. Through this instability often affected her social life her literary productivity continued with few breaks until her suicide. MacLaurin talks deeply about the stream of consciousness as a technique in general and then investigates how this technique puts into practice in Virginia Woolf's novels. This argument

can be seen as an attempt at the recovery of the critical debate which has emerged in the contemporary response to Woolf's creating writing. MacLaurin further studies the issue of group consciousness and states that "*Woolf treats these issues in paradoxical manner, thus, making its position debated and questioned.*"<sup>7</sup>

In this book MacLaurin also deals with dominant currents of thought in Virginia Woolf's own time. He relates his observation there to his concentration of the issue of consciousness in Woolf's fiction to gauge the extent to which such modes of thought are employed by Woolf in her work. Sigmund Freud 1896 was the first to recognize the connection between the adult survivors' mental health problems and their past histories of child sexual abuse thus explaining the problem of Hysteria. This led to his seduction theory. After much uproar by his contemporaries, Freud denounced the seduction theory and replaced it with the Oedipal theory. Consequently, in Freud's view, Woolf suffered from the sexual abuse that she was subjected to in her childhood. Likewise, Hermione Lee saw that: "

*"Virginia Woolf was a sane woman who had an illness... Her illness is attributed to genetic, environmental and biological factors. It was periodic and recurrent."*<sup>8</sup>

All these critical views stressed the idea that Woolf stand points concerning feminism and the female role stem from deep personal experiences. Indeed, her case has been exemplary in that, she seeks to find a correspondence between the biological and objective planes of experience.

The study of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* concentrate on to leading essays in which she developed an innovative and politically challenging analysis of the causes and effects of women's exclusion from the British cultural, political and economical life. Mrs. Woolf searched for a history which belonged to women, and in doing so, discovered that history was inseparable from the history of women's relation to language. Starting from consideration of the troubled relations between women and fiction in *A Room of One's Own* 1929, she moves on to a much broader analysis of the political and cultural implications of women's oppression in *Three Guineas* 1938. In both, women are the center and the target of the author's interest, particularly how society response to and considers her position and rights.

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf develops the theory of the relation between gender and writing. She examines the exclusion of women from educational institutions and the relations between this exclusion and the unequal distribution of wealth. Her fictional narrator Mary Beton experienced this exclusion when she was in Oxbridge where she was prevented from entering the library of all men's college. In this work, Mrs. Woolf faced and experienced male dominance and she was forced by this dominance to raise the feminist goal of changing society or the world to a place where the male and the female voices may have been equally valued. Despite her adamant persistence in this field, this dream of equality remained essentially inaccessible. It is for this reason, that the tone of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* was full of resentment and discontentment.

The result of ten years of research was Woolf's *Three Guineas* which built on the argument, she developed in *A room of One's Own*. In this essay, she advocated a form of radical political action in which women would form themselves into a society of outsiders in order to challenge the rise of Fascism and the drift towards war. She also analyzed women's position in culture hastening towards war.

Woolf's *A Room of One's own* is a landmark in feminist literature. It is considered as the first major work in feminist criticism since it has been viewed as the:

*"first modern text of feminist criticism, the model in both theory and*

*practically socialist feminist of a specifically socialist feminist criticism.*"<sup>9</sup>

Woolf employs a number of methodologies, historical and sociologist analysis, fictional hypothesis, and philosophy, notably to answer her initial question of why there have been so few female writers. As it has been described,

*"Woolf's A Room has become a project that houses us. In her power, failure and perplexities she is a major architect and designer of feminist criticism"*.<sup>10</sup>

Many writers use this piece of work as a tool to represent their suffering. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf suggests that female writer is always an inherited as well as an originator. Her own legacy has crossed color and class lines in the feminist community. Michele Barrett, writing from a Marxist Feminist perspective, praises Woolf's fruitful and still largely unexplored insight in *A Room of One's Own* that

*"The condition under which men and women produce literature are materially different"*<sup>11</sup>

At that time, women were under the control of their male counterparts. They did not have their own work or even own money. As a result, they did not have the mental freedom. And if they tried to write, they lacked the courage to sign their works. Tillie Olsen used *A Room* to meditate on the silence of women that were more marginalized than Shakespeare's sister, exploring not only gender as one of the "traditional silencers of humanity, but also "class economic circumstances- and colors "Woolf's point of view in *A Room* is that of a collective voice, of the literary influence on women writers and it has been explored in the works of some later feminist critics. For example, Jane Marcus in her essay *Thinking Back through our Mother's* emphasizes Woolf's reliance on the work of other women. Woolf knew by experience, how women influence each other.

*"Far from Harlod Bloom's concept of the anxiety of influence, it is rather the opposite, affording the woman writer relief from anxiety, acting as a hide out in history where slide can lick her wounds between attacks on the patriarchy"*<sup>12</sup>

*A Room* derives its importance from the several themes it covers. Actually, they are the basic principles the women have to gain to be able to write as men. According to the present reading, old topics are the outcomes of one major theme which is the financial independence as seen in Michelle Barrett's statement:

*"If we may prophesy, women in time to come will write fewer novels only but poetry and criticism and history. But to be sure, one is looking a head to that golden, that perhapsfabulous age when women will have what has so long been denied them leisure, and money, and a room to themselves"*,<sup>13</sup>

to be able to write, there women ought to cross many obstacles such as gaining the proper education, proper space, and most importantly, money. The material autonomy is of prime importance in determining the position of the female writers. Indeed, *A Room* as manifested in the very title does stress privacy, this freedom is to be independent.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is a key word of feminist literary criticism. written after she delivered two lectures on the topic of fiction' at Cambridge University in 1928, Woolf's essay examines the educational, social and financial disadvantages women have faced throughout history. It contains Woolf's famous argument

that, “Women must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction. Although Woolf describes this as an opinion upon one minor point, and the essay explores the “unsolved problems” of women and fiction.

Through the fictionalized character of “Mary”- who visits the British Museum to find out about everything that has ever been written about women. Woolf built the argument that literature and history is a male construct that had traditionally marginalized women. Women are inferior writers or inferior subjects, instead locating their silence in their material and social circumstances. Women have been barred from attending schools and Universities for intended, or excluded law for inheritance, or expected to Mary during which their time is spent house keeping and childrearing. Woolf imagines what kind of life “Judith Shakespeare” “talented sister of Shakespeare – might have believed, concluding that she, would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to certainty.

It is also an issue of gendered values, Woolf insists that writing in the 1920s, it is, the masculine values that prevail. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. Woolf ends with an appeal to the audience to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast; Judith Shakespeare would come again if he worked for her and so to work even in poverty and obscurity is worthwhile. Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* is a landmark of twentieth century feminist thought. It explores the history of women in literature through an unconventional and highly provocative investigation of the social and material conditions required for the writing of literature. These conditions leisure time, privacy and financial independence underwrite all literary production, but they are particularly relevant to understand the situation of women in the literary tradition because women historically, have been uniformly deprived of those basic prerequisites.

In her exploration of this idea, Woolf launches a number of provocative socio-logical and aesthetic critiques. She reviews not only the state of women in literature, but also the state of scholarship, both theoretical and historical, concerning women. She also elaborates an aesthetics based on the principle of incandescence, the ideal state in which everything that is merely personal is consumed in the intensity and truth of one's art. Just as Woolf speaks out against traditional hierarchies in the content of her essay, so to does she reject standard logical argumentation in her essay's form. Woolf innovatively draws on the resources of fiction to compensate for gaps in the factual record about women. She writes a history of a women's thinking about the history of thinking women; her essay is a reconstruction and a reenactment as well as an argument.

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