

Virginia Woolf: A Room of One's Own

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Virginia Woolf

Adeline Virginia Woolf was born in 1882 to an affluent and influential family in London (Kensington), and attended King's College London. One of the prime pioneers of the 'Stream of Consciousness' technique, some of Woolf's best works of fiction include *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928). On the other hand, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is a non-fictional work with a fictional narrator, an essay conjoining the two lectures she delivered at Girton and Newnham College at Cambridge University in 1928. The essay looks at women as characters in fiction, and discusses the short history of women writers as well as the conditions necessary for a woman to write.

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Virginia Woolf a profound 20th century feminist illustrates the history of women's literary writing in patriarchal society where they had no room of their own. They were the regular victim of men's anger, misunderstanding and hostility, exploitation. Therefore, in her essay 'A Room of One's Own' she focused on feminist analysis of women's literary tradition. This radical process reveals the hidden truths of women's writing, their success, failure and the circumstances under which they wrote. Moreover, the essay is also a powerful answer to the male biased assumption and society that women are biologically inferior and mentally weak with no creativity. Because of such gender discrimination women have less literary writing and have a few writers.

Woolf depicts the reasons like the lack of material resources, lack of appropriate socio economic environment, lack of economic dependence, lack of education, domesticity, lack of time, public relation, lack of their own room and social freedom that have hinder the women's history of writing such lacks restricts the proper growth of women's physicality and spirituality.

Woolf says that the so called mental and physical inferiority of women is not in born but the outcome of male biased cruel society and values. She therefore, addresses the question why sister of Shakespeare was not able to write even a single play.

She further says had Shakespeare been a woman in his time he would not have been the father of English drama. If she had written, she would have been a monster, not a writer. So Woolf demands for the equal exercise of material resources in a society so that both men and women came together.

Woolf, while giving the historical survey of women and fiction' praises the women writers who initiated the tradition of women writing despite the social hostility, Lady Winchelsea is

seventeenth century women writers and burst out again the position of women in society. As a result she suffered from different social injustices like her writings were denied to publish, remained in melancholy she was ridiculed and laughed at. Therefore, her writing opens with a feministic speech, “Women live like Bats, labours like Beasts and die like Worms.”

This statement shows the whole scenario of contemporary social economic atmosphere that was absolutely against the development of female personality. The assumption was that no women of sense, sanity and modesty could write anything else, she was enlisted as an eccentric or a monster.

Woolf praises Mrs. Aphra Behn, who wrote for her financial support and proved that women could write and even for living. Similarly, she praises Jane Austin, George Eliot and Bronte sisters for their own room.

So it was easy for them to write fiction with their domestic experience. Some wrote aggressively some mildly and some with male pseudonyms. Austin reflects her domesticity but Charlotte Bronte is free and presents herself against social and male chauvinism.

Thus, Woolf is of the opinion that literature is open to anyone. People can close the door of libraries but it is impossible for them to restrict the freedom of mind of women. Despite the social and gender inequality female writers produced some great works which prove that female also feel as the man feel. They also possess intellect and creativity. Only male biased society takes them as inferior to prove their so-called superiority.

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One of the chief arguments that Woolf makes is that if a woman is to write fiction, she must have “Money and a room of her own”. She necessitates the importance of material wealth for intellectual freedom. She questions the privileges that men have and women don’t – “Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?”. She asserts that poverty for women has stood as an impediment for women writers time and again, whereas to become a writer and to have the luxury of time to write, one would first need to have their basic needs met.

Woolf condemns patriarchal rule in England where men have more privileges and women are treated as second class citizens. She attacks the tyranny of male dominance that denies women access to equal income, equal opportunity for education and equal rights. While she compares the struggles of both men and women as “Life for both sexes... was arduous”, she asserts that women need immense courage and confidence. It is because men can easily acquire confidence and have the “Freedom to think of things in themselves”. Besides, their activity is given more importance than that of women per se.

If put into the Indian context, one can relate to the gender differences that Woolf talks about and the impact that it has on women’s psyche. It is true that women have been the poorer lot and are still struggling with gender gap in payrolls. Women still have to tend to household duties, take

care of children and suffer from other forms of gender discrimination. Psychologically speaking, women have been made to feel inferior whether it is at home, workplace or in fiction. However, to consider that a woman who has a room to herself and a regular income would necessarily be a good writer is too presumptuous.

Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* critiques Woolf for excluding the women of color from her essay who are deprived of the means to obtain an independent room for themselves. She questions Woolf for being assured that women need money and a room in order to write fiction and then reminds us of Phillis Wheatley, "A slave, who owned not even herself? This sickly, frail, Black girl who required a servant of her own at times—her health was so precarious—and who, had she been white, would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day".

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The position of Wheatley is far different from what Woolf's narrator proclaims, she neither owns herself nor does she have A room of her own. Like Wheatley, there are other women writers who exist outside of 'the room' that Woolf sets apart for women writers. While on one hand Walker points out the limitations of Woolf's essay, and on the other, she brings out a womanist prose with metaphorical and physical space of "our mothers' gardens" paying homage to the same bid Woolf sought for, a separate space, a 'room' for women writers.

While tracing the history of England referring to the works of Professor Trevelyan, Woolf reminds us that history barely mentions women. Nevertheless, in fiction and poetry women have been the favorite subject of men. Their existence is presented only in relation to men. Appearing as rulers of kings and conquerors in Literature, Woolf recounts that women in reality were instead being traded as slaves in marriage. They had no agency or the skills to read and write. If women were denied material and other conditions required to reach a state of mind that would allow women to write, Woolf resolves that women could not possibly have manifested their creative talents.

Women's writing has suffered from a lack of tradition as there were not many women writing back in the day says Woolf, and so, their capabilities should not be judged without considering other aspects. She invokes an imaginary Shakespeare's Sister who could have been equally talented but was not given the same training, and hence, even after trying hard to work her way through would have been shunned by male dominated society. The novel was one genre that was still new and it offered women a space to build their legacy. Woolf appreciates the work of Jane Austen who she says not only writes as a woman but "as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman."

A Room of One's Own is a significant text even today, as women still have a lot to achieve. And despite Woolf's writing coming from a privileged position, there's much to learn and think about. At the end of the essay, Woolf makes a passionate appeal to all women asking them to

write. She hopes that writing should not be restricted to mere self-expression but become art. Conversely, I feel the former cannot be disregarded as we have much to learn about a woman's experiences from different places and time. I also understand that while money is not everything but is important so long as it buys you independence to do what you want. And perhaps, on my next trip I shall idle away connecting back to Woolf and let my thoughts take over.

“I hope that you will possess yourselves of money enough to travel and to idle, to contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at the street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream.”

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