

An Appraisal of the Feminist Concerns of Virginia Woolf with Special Reference to Her Essay - A Room Of One's Own

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ABSTRACT: Virginia Woolf, besides being a prolific writer, was also the pioneer of the feminist movement in England during the 19th and 20th centuries. She wrote extensively in a variety of genres, which included fiction, literary reviews, critical essays, short sketches, biographies, feminist items and also maintained her regular diary. In her writings she frequently gave vent to her pain and anguish against the male dominated Victorian society to which she herself belonged, alleging that it treated women harshly and subjected them to various kinds of oppression and victimization. It deprived them of their basic rights in the society, wherefore they could not go to school, move freely at public places, eat their meals in hotels and restaurants, choose their life partners, or join profession of their choice, etc. She, however, thought that it was only by achieving economic independence that women could get rid of all their problems. In the light of the above the present paper seeks to examine critically the feminist concerns of Virginia Woolf, quoting references particularly from her essay, *A Room of One's Own*.

KEYWORDS: *Feminist Movement, Patriarchal Norms, Victorian Society, Gender Bias, Oppression, Victimization, Emancipation, etc.*

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Virginia Woolf distinguishes herself not only as a versatile genius and a *littérateur par excellence*, but also as the pioneer of the feminist movement in England during the 19th and 20th centuries. The canvas of her writings is fairly wide, which apart from fiction, also includes reviews, critical essays, short sketches, biographies and feminist tracts, etc. She also maintained her diary regularly, in which she usually recorded her reactions to the reviews on her works. She pursued the work of writing passionately, as in one of her diary entries, she characteristically tells, "I'm letting my pen fling itself on paper like a leopard starved for blood..." (Woolf, 1984, II: 250) Her works can broadly be placed in two groups: fictional and non-fictional. The fictional works naturally include novels and short stories, while the non-fictional ones are comprised by essays, reviews, rejoinders, letters, lectures, etc. Barring a few exceptions, her writings have generally been experimental, wherein she seeks to challenge the accepted norms of the Victorian society, of which she herself was a part.

The Victorian society like most of the civilized societies of the world subscribed to the patriarchal norms, which envisaged the hegemony of the senior most male member of the family over all its members and the entire household. It is generally believed that the region, where the languages like Sanskrit, Persian, Greek, Roman, Spanish, Slav, Celtic, German, French, English, Russian, etc. are spoken, constitute the common cradle of the civilized people or the early Aryans, whom the scholars have first preferred to call as the *Wiros* or the *Indo-Europeans* (cf. Tiwari, 2003: 34-35). The hypothesis is based on the availability of several words common to all the above languages for a common object, more particularly to denote various family relations. It is, therefore, rightly claimed that the Indo-European civilization is the mother of all the ancient world civilizations, like Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greek, Rome, China, Persia, and India, and that all of them subscribed to the patriarchal norms (cf. Rapson, 1968: 57-58). Being the offshoot of the Greco-Roman civilization, the British society, too was traditionally patriarchal, where, as Virginia sarcastically remarks, "Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction. They were soldiers or they were sailors; they filled that office or they made that law. But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great grandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition..." (Woolf, 1958: 76-77)

Virginia Woolf was also full of regrets that women, unlike their male counterparts, did not undertake the work of writing as a profession and lamented that "in the sixteenth century, when the dramatists and poets were most active, the women were dumb. (Woolf, 1958: 77) Obviously, the failure of women to air their views freely on various social issues, more so the gender bias was due to the restraints imposed upon them by the male dominated society. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, breaking their age old silence women began to write and speak from public platforms against the injustice meted to them, which by the mid-nineteenth century eventually took the shape and magnitude of a movement. As a result, a host of women writers sprang up

to champion the women's cause, among whom the most prominent name was undoubtedly that of Virginia Woolf, who was sore that the historians always neglected women, as at no point of time did they record anything worthwhile to understand their position, problems and predicament. In her essay *A Room of One's Own* she curtly states that occasionally an individual woman's name, "an Elizabeth, or a Mary; a queen or a great lady" might find a mention, "but by no possible means could middle-class women...constitute the historian's view of the past." (Woolf, 2005, III: 42). Holding the historian guilty for recording "not opinions but facts," she questions indignantly the absence of proper knowledge that "under what conditions women lived, not throughout the ages, but in England, say, in the time of Elizabeth" (III: 39). She also notes with anguish that what little the historians have written about women too is quite disheartening and presents but only a gloomy picture of them.

Woolf holds the social ideals of the age responsible for the intellectual backwardness of women and to illustrate her viewpoint in *A Room of One's Own* she concocts the image of Judith, as the talented sister of Shakespeare. According to the story, Shakespeare though "a wild boy, who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer," was sent to some prestigious grammar school to learn "Latin - Ovid, Virgil and Horace - and the elements of grammar and logic" (Woolf, 2005, III: 44). Conversely, Judith though equally adventurous and imaginative, was not sent to school and "had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages..." (III: 45). Besides, even after getting married and having a child Shakespeare was free to pursue his career, who went to London, joined a theatre group and soon "became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practicing his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen (III: 44). As against this Judith always remained in chains, describing her agony Woolf further says, "Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighboring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father" (III: 45). But when Judith still remained unrelenting, he gave up scolding and instead resorted to blackmail her emotionally, begging her "...not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage. He would give her a chain of beads or a fine petticoat, he said; and there were tears in his eyes" (III: 45). Now Judith did what her father wanted as she couldn't afford to disobey him and break his heart. However, her marriage didn't last long, as Judith, who was still in her teens and was a fine singer also with a taste for theatre like her brother failed to suppress her ambitions any longer and one night left home. She contacted the manager of the theatre, who first laughed at the very idea of a woman becoming an actress, then allowed her to stay, abused her sexually and eventually deserted her with a child by him, thus left with no option in sheer desperation she committed suicide (III: 45-46) It is quite interesting that Woolf sums up the story of Judith with the remarks that "any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at." (III: 47) Thus, by way of the story of Judith, Woolf seeks to highlight the double standard adopted by the society in the upbringing of male and female children, as per which in the British society of the time the boys were groomed with utmost care. They were sent to good schools to take lessons in subjects like classical literature, grammar, logic, etc.; and even if wicked, flirtatious and home deserters they could pursue the careers of their choice and rise to eminence. But as against this the girls even if talented remained at home under rigorous patriarchal control. Consequently, they seldom had an occasion to read the subjects that their brothers did, except reading slyly at home a few pages from the books of their brothers in a casual manner. Besides, they were married early to ones their parents chose for them, securing their willingness by coercive means, emotional blackmail or even by cheap gifts.

It is thus obvious that the British society treated women harshly, held them captive of the social evils like illiteracy and child marriage and didn't allow them a role even in such important matters as their own marriage. Woolf also claims that even after the lapse of some two hundred years the position of women did not change much, as in the time of the Stuarts, "It was still the exception for women of the upper and middle class to choose their own husbands, and when the husband had been assigned, he was lord and master, so far at least as law and custom could make him." (Woolf, 2005, III: 40) She further says that although Shakespeare's women like Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, etc. and a few others figuring in some other seventeenth-century literature were in no way wanting in personality and character, they had no existence in practical life save in the fiction, as the women were still "locked up, beaten and flung about the room" (ibid). It is probably in the light of the above that summing up the real position of the woman Woolf says, "she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger... she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband" (III: 41). In support of her contention that right from the early times women in England had been treated harshly and were subjected to various kinds of proscriptions and prescriptions, persecution and punishment, Woolf, quotes Professor Trevelyan's History of England, which states:

Wife-beating was a recognized right of man, and was practised without shame by high as well as low...the daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten

and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion.... Betrothal often took place while one, or both of the parties, was in the cradle, and marriage when they were scarcely out of the nurses' charge (III: 39-40).

Besides, unequal and contemptuous treatment to women at public places everywhere appears to be a matter of great concern to Virginia Woolf. She felt greatly annoyed that even in the public places women were not treated on equal footing, so much so that at few occasions she herself had to suffer for being a woman. In this regard, she relates indignantly as to how once she was stopped from walking across the grass court of the Oxbridge by its male caretaker. Recording her feelings of the moment she writes, "Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me." (Woolf, 2005, I: 4) Berchtold points out that Woolf felt all the more offended that although "Oxbridge has been financed with money that comes from women as well as from men. Still, their money is not placed to use for them" (Berchtold, May 2000). Further, she also notes with anguish that the Arthur's Education Fund, (AEF), to which "every one must contribute, including the female siblings," helped only the young men and not women in their academic pursuits to get them settled in life (ibid). Besides, in her essay she also recalls that also at another occasion, she was barred from entering the University's library, on the ground that "ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction" (Woolf, 2005, I: 5). Besides, even in the college mess, Woolf notes, the quality of food served to fellows differed gender-wise, which used to be sumptuous and multiple for the male but sub-standard and plain for the ladies. Woolf laughs at the hypocrisy of the male scholars, for, they seldom praise the food and drinks served at the parties as if it was against the etiquettes "to mention soup and salmon and ducklings," and the parties are meant "for something very witty" to be said, or "something very wise" to be done (I: 8). During the parties the males felt quite at leisure with "No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself," where "lighting a good cigarette, one sank among the cushions in the window seat." (I: 9). As against this the ladies in the hostel would eat their meals in the dining hall, without complaining against either the inferior quality of food, or the common mode of dining, and then dispersed quietly, "but not before cleaning and setting things right in the hall for breakfast next morning" (I: 15). However, Woolf couldn't restrain herself from commenting on the ill effects of the drab food served to women, and says that it leads to their cultural poverty since "a good dinner is of great importance to good talk." (I: 16). In fact, she was so much pained by the gender discrimination practiced openly at the Oxbridge, particularly for the different quality of food to males and females being served that she asks indignantly "Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?" (II: 23). Meanwhile, she also asks as to why the male represented power, money and influence and considered women deficient in some or the other way.

Virginia Woolf did also not subscribe to the concept of "The Angel in the House", which seems to her to be a conspiracy on the part of the man, who forged it obviously to legitimize the subjugation of the woman. In fact, in the Victorian age the image of the ideal woman was conceived under the above pseudonym. As for the expression, "The Angel in the House," it constitutes the title of a very popular poem of Coventry Patmore, in which he describes his wife Emily as the perfect Victorian woman, who possesses the angel like qualities and is, therefore, a perfect role model for all the women. In fact, it is a narrative poem, wherein depicting what he calls 'The Wife's Tragedy,' the poet says that an ideal woman is one who sacrifices all her personal aspirations to keep her husband happy and is always ready to forgive him for his sins. Not only this she even owns the faults and follies of her husband herself and offers him her selfless love in both, joy and grief (Patmore, 2004). Though the poem was based on an emotional plain and was very much personal, in due course it came to symbolize the ideals and values of women in general, according to which devoted and submissive to her husband a virtuous woman had to be "passive powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and pure," which were considered the traits of an angel. It also appears that this ideal initially defined only the middle class women, but in view of the example of Queen Victoria, who was wedded to a domestic life and was most devoted to her husband Prince Albert, it came to be universally applied to the women in general during the nineteenth century British society. The poem did not receive much attention of the readers at the time it was first published in 1854, but it became correspondingly popular along with the feminist ideas gaining momentum, which led to the issuance of its revised edition as early as in 1862. The growing popularity of the poem is testified by the fact that the phrase 'angel in the house' became synonym to the morality thrust upon women arbitrarily by the patriarchal society. Commenting upon the influence the poem had upon the later feminist writers, William Makepeace Thackeray in one of his write-ups remarks, "For Virginia Woolf, the repressive ideal of women represented by the Angel in the House was still so potent that she wrote, in 1931, 'killing the Angel in the House' was part of the occupation of a woman writer." (Thackeray, March 2, 2011) Thus, ever since the publication of the above poem, the term "angel in the house," became a popular phraseology to symbolize the ideal woman of the Victorian era, who was selflessly devoted to her children and

submissive to her husband. In this context one is reminded of the Indian society, which too subscribes to the same principle about the position of women right from the Rigvedic period, according to which the wife entirely depended on her husband and “enjoyed authority over the household” only unto his pleasure, as he was “her lord and breadwinner” and she was required to keep an “unflinching loyalty” towards him. (Tiwari, 2003: 50)

Besides, the principle of chastity and sexual morality, which the British society strongly advocated was also not free from the gender bias, as it was applied only to women, and men were left out of its ambit. Virginia Woolf takes strong exceptions against this one-sided dictate and remarks curtly that “chastity may be a fetish invented by certain societies for unknown reasons - but were nonetheless inevitable. Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman’s life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest order” (Woolf, 2005, III: 47) The story of Judith amply exemplifies that a woman who dared break the above principle of chastity was sure to land her in trouble, while a man, doing the same and even beyond, went scot-free. Commenting on the point Woolf states that in those days no girl could have walked out of home to an unknown place to seek a career among the strangers as such, “without doing herself violence and suffering an anguish which may have been irrational.” (III: 47)

Virginia Woolf also realized that the woman was caught ‘between the devil and the deep sea.’ Commenting upon her review of “The Memoirs of Harriette Wilson” in *Nation and Athenaeum* (June 13, 1925), wherein Woolf has purportedly remarked that the “women’s life (was) full of confusion”, Vijay L. Sharma reiterates that across “the broad continent of a woman’s life falls the shadow of a sword...On one side all is correct definite and orderly...But on the other side all is confusion” (Sharma, 1977: 46). Elaborating further the cause of the sorry state of women and their depression, particularly of the educated ones, in her essay Woolf says, “We, daughters of educated men, are between the devil and the deep sea. Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility” (Woolf & Shiach, 1998: 261) Thus, while relating the story of Judith in her, *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf says that woman, “who was born with a gift of poetry in the sixteenth century, was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself. All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain” (Woolf, 2005, III: 48). Describing the frustration of women, she notes with indignation as to how for men, who are well educated, all the careers are wide open and they are the virtual leaders of the caravan, and bemoans:

(That) our brothers who have been educated at public schools and universities, mounting those steps, passing in and out of those doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practising medicine, transacting business, making money. It is a solemn sight, always—a procession, like a caravanserai crossing a desert. Great-grandfathers, grandfathers, fathers, uncles—they all went that way, wearing their gowns, wearing their wigs, some with ribbons across their breasts, others without. (Bell & Offen, 1983: 359)

Virginia Woolf was also shocked to behold poverty rampant even among the working women, as even after working regularly, they didn’t get adequate wages. Thus, in *A Room of One’s Own* she laments that women even after working year after year find it hard “to get two thousand pounds together and as much as they could do to get thirty thousand pounds...we burst out in scorn at the reprehensible poverty of our sex.” (Woolf, 2005, I: 18). She also takes cudgel against women begetting multiple children, accordingly she fancies of the mother of her imaginary friend Mary, who “had thirteen children by a minister of the church,” and suggests that earning money and bearing a large number of children, can not go together smoothly, as bearing and rearing children involve a long and arduous process...Making a fortune and bearing thirteen children — no human being could stand it” (I: 20). Woolf, therefore, makes a wishful presumption that if Mary’s mother was free from the above obligations and “had gone into business; had become a manufacturer of artificial silk or a magnate on the Stock Exchange; if she had left two or three hundred thousand pounds (they) could have been sitting at our ease to-night and the subject of our talk might have been archaeology, botany, anthropology, physics, the nature of the atom, mathematics, astronomy, relativity, geography,” and “might have been exploring or writing; mooning about the venerable places of the earth; sitting contemplative on the steps of the Parthenon, or going at ten to an office and coming home comfortably at half-past four to write a little poetry.” (I: 19). But then as if laughing at her own foolish thoughts for being oblivious of the norms of the patriarchal society, as per which everything earned by a woman belongs to her male relation, she laments

(That) in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned. It is only for the last forty-eight years that Mrs. Seton has had a penny of her own. For all the centuries before that it would have been her husband’s property. (I: 20)

She, therefore, firmly believed that the root cause of all the problems faced by women, which accounted for their low status in the society, were the outcome of their economic dependence. Accordingly, the main hypothesis of her essay *A Room of One’s Own* is that women are economically crippled, they ought to “have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,” and that without this “the great problem of the

true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction” shall remain unsolved. (Sharma, 1977: 46I: 1-2) The above idea subsists on the assumption that “women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time...have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves...have not had a dog’s chance of writing poetry, (hence) so much stress on money and a room of one’s own” (Woolf, 2005, VI: 102). Emphasizing upon the need of economic self sufficiency for them, Woolf exhorts women that “...have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think.” (VI: 108) She firmly believed that the economic dependence of women not only affected her intellectual pursuits, but also determined her place in the society. Berchtold also holds the economic constraints responsible for the poor and subservient status of women in the family, and remarks, “that a woman, in order to be able to write fiction, needs an allowance of at least £500 a year as well as a room of her own, i.e., the freedom of being unencumbered by demanding family members” (Berchtold, May 2000). However, eventually Woolf holds women themselves responsible for their misery, and says, “...our mothers had mismanaged their affairs very gravely. Not a penny could be spared for ‘amenities’; for partridges and wine, beads and turf, books and cigars, libraries and leisure. To raise bare walls out of bare earth was the utmost they could do. (Woolf, 2005, I: 21)

In a nutshell, Virginia Woolf visualizes various problems that women of her times faced, which mostly revolved round the unequal treatment to women in various ways both at home and the outside. She firmly believed that it is because of the gender bias that women lagged behind in education, failed to make an independent career to be economically self- dependent, or to air their views freely and fearlessly, thereby becoming an author themselves rather than an object of writing for the male authors, who often try to project them in a negative shade. As a solution to the women’s problem Woolf exhorts women first to become economically independent, what she calls to have “a room of one’s own,” as it alone can enable them “to write fiction” that symbolizes their intellectual and otherwise freedom. By doing so a chain will start with girls getting proper education, training and exposure, then earning money, becoming writers and enjoying life at par with men, thereby breaking the age old shackles of servitude, which is by far the prime motive of the feminism.

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