

Feminist Analysis of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own

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ABSTRACT

Feminism to talk about in general terms is a broader approach. But when analysed on individual level it gives a narrower description of the movement and its causes. One such analysis is of modern age writer and feminist Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own". The essay focuses why women should have their personal space and strong finances to write to fiction. A feminist analysis of such a work is worth conducting. Feminism has different shades and different approaches at different times. Virginia Woolf was a radical feminist and she with her innovations in the novel writing and feminist writing has given an altogether different outlook to the issues of her community. This paper focuses on analysing those outlooks and developing some new.

Keywords: Feminism, Fiction, Factual Criticism, Gender, Tradition.

Feminism has been a centre of attraction for everyone since its beginning. Though in its initial stage the idea was vague but as time passed it became crystal clear with its ideologies. With different outlook to various issues related to women. In this category the most famous names we can quote are Elaine Showalter, Helen Cixous, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf etc. Whatever the phase had been, the sole purpose was the upliftment of women's stature in society.

Where First wave feminism which occurred during the 19th and 20th century focused on woman's political representation as Right to Vote or reproductive rights also, this wave had its own loopholes. It focused only on white women's rights and this widened the factor of racism. Overall it was a more practical approach because at that time there was lack of fundamental rights and they could demand anything related to arts or literature. At that the social upliftment of women was the basic need and the first wave focused only on that.

Second wave started around 1960s was more about social representation and upliftment of women's roles, whereas the third wave was more inclusive. It focused on issues like racism, individuality of women and cultural exposure. Personalities like Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Judy Evans etc. are responsible for making second wave feminism more effective and paved a way for the upcoming generations.

After gaining some political and social upliftment it was time for individual growth which took place during mid 1990s. By this time women received some power and status and this was the reason that they were able to talk more on personal topics. Second wave provided them the platform to further enhance the scope of the movement. Rebecca Walker, Kimberle Crenshaw, Virginia Woolf were some great figures of the time. One of the most seminal feminist of the time Virginia Woolf, who with her innovations in the field of literature and criticism has given women a platform to speak their heart. Whether it is Mrs.

Dalloway or *To the Lighthouse* or *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf has taken the issue of feminine sensibility very seriously.

Being a series of lectures delivered by her at two different colleges i.e. Newham college and Girton College, this work is not a fictional narrative only but a factual criticism also. The way she has framed the mingled facts with fiction is marvellous. *A Room of One's Own* is a true feminist work because it talks about feminism on real grounds. It not only focuses on women but also on those neglected areas of Men's sensibility which need to be talked about. The real equality she says can come when we want to experience it while respecting the other gender. *A Room of One's Own* focuses on the dire need of having a room i.e. a personal space and money if a woman is to write fiction, which translated as if art needs to establish itself, it needs those resources which are necessary to replenish it. Without the practical necessities no genius can flourish and if a woman really needs to excel in the outer world she needs to expand her inner world. It is rightly been said that Woolf is one the first writers to develop a woman-centric notion of reading and education. 1.

The fictional Judith Shakespeare is the representative of Elizabethan women. She is not able to excess the resources that her brother William Shakespeare does. Without proper resources, genius can't be flourished. She was not sent to school and a decision was taken to get her married as soon as possible but when she revolted she got locked inside a room. Woolf's only purpose here is to show the contrasting reality of two genders in the same age.

"It is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people." 2.

The narrative of this critical essay shifts from one thought to another very smoothly. At one moment she is in Oxbridge (fictional university suggesting Oxford and Cambridge), the next moment her attention shifts to a cat who is without a tail describing the lack that was there and void in she was living. Ver soon the narrative shift to the war and then to a meal at Fernham which was poor representing the state of women. The condition in which they were living were worse than the condition of their male counterparts. A world where women are deprived of the basic facilities and resources how can one imagine that they are given equal opportunities to study and write anything.

The way the narrator was restrained from entering into a library because she was a woman and all alone without a male companion, was the reality of her times and it was in some way relatable to her past generations. This shifting of the narrative at such a speed and the psychological action being given more importance than the physical one is the perfect example of the Stream of consciousness novel which was prevalent at the time of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. The touch of feminism has made it more relatable to the modern audience. Because true feminism will be providing what they don't have, to give them a support and inspiration which they need the most.

Moving from the Elizabethan era to crossing many more in the middle she comes to the Victorian age. The age where the female novelists were emerging. Jane Austen and Bronte sisters were the seminal ones. Like a true feminist Virginia Woolf has described the difference of approach of the two writers. Austen on one hand was very practical in her approach towards women's issues but Charlotte Bronte gave it a touch of her own pains.

"Charlotte Bronte, with all her splendid gift for prose, stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands....Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, sharply sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it. Thus, with less genius for writing that Charlotte Bronte, she got infinitely more said." 3.

The next section analysis the evolution of women's writing. Now women are writing books that are not only novels.

"There are books on all sorts of subjects which a generation ago no woman would have touched." 4.

She is now talking about her own generation. By taking the example of Mary Carmichael's novel "Life's Adventures" she thinks that it may not be as smooth as Austen's but it has its own identity and own structure. The novel takes up bolder themes like homosexuality that was an innovation in women's writing. The last section deals with her broader viewpoint as a feminist. She has a request to write all kinds of books and not only novels so that a history could be created for the upcoming generations. She also says in her work *Three Guineas*,

"Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine." 5.
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The importance of financial stability of women is so real that if we have that we can stand on our own and not look helpless. The narrator says that her aunt when left her with a certain amount she felt confident but she thinks of those women who face such difficulties in their lives, our mothers have not left us with any legacy and resources that we can rely upon. She says,

"What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us? Powdering their noses? Looking in at shop windows? Flaunting in the sun at Monte Carlo?" 6. 24

While taking up their issues they should also consider the integrity of the other gender and try to include some untouched topics of their sensibility also. If we try to work for her, Judith Shakespeare in her next birth will now be able to explore her genius. Her feminism is radical as,

"The best artists, believed Woolf, were always a combination of the man and the woman, or 'man-womanly', and 'woman-manly'. 7.

Because a writer is the one who culminates different perspectives into his/her art. This beauty of art enables him/her to capture different lives, their issues and their problems. Virginia Woolf is truly a great feminist who has breathed a new life into a different approach towards issues of her sex and their resolutions.

While doing a feminist analysis of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* there emerges a great scope for a new way vision of feminism. Virginia used to write at the time when there was evolution going on in the field women's writing. From Judith Shakespeare to Aphra Ben, from Jane Austen, Emily, Anne and Charlotte Bronte to Woolf's contemporary Mary Carmichael the evolution can be traced. Judith was not even allowed to go to school or have other basic resources to develop her skills, Aphra Ben then became the first professional woman writer. Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte then worked to intensify the spirit of novel writing by their practical and passionate writing. Mary Carmichael though didn't write as beautiful as the above two quoted but she innovated the form. She included the concept of homosexuality which was new at that time. She showed how it is normal that woman can like woman. The characters in Mary's novel, Chloe and Olivia liked each other. It was a change and even the narrator felt it as she said, "Chloe liked Olivia..." Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women....And then it struck me how immense a change was there. Cleopatra did not like Olivia. And how completely ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA would have been altered had he done so! As it is, I thought, letting my mind, I am afraid, wander a little from LIFE'S ADVENTURE, the whole thing is simplified, conventionalized, if one dared say it, absurd." 8. 87

Through these changes there is a hope that the coming generations of women writers will experiment in different genres and not only fiction. Poetry is considered to be one the most refined form of literature and thus she wishes that women writers should flourish in poetry writing also. The feminist discourse of this critical work is worth analysing and different approaches can be drawn from it.

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