



Virginia Woolf's "Women and Fiction": A Turn Toward the Impersonal

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ABSTRACT

"Women and Fiction" penned by Virginia Woolf, is an attempt to unveil the obliterated history of female writers as well as to announce the arrival of a new and charged English woman who is a voter, wage earner as well as a responsible citizen. This radical change transforms her writing from being personal into impersonal. She is no more impulsive, an angry woman writer. She is no more emotional rather she is intellectual, she is political. The interests of her father and her brother are now replaced by her interest; in short, this is a turn toward the impersonal.

KEYWORDS: Unveil, obliterated, asserts, freedom, explore, women

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I. INTRODUCTION

M.H. Abrams, in his A Glossary of Literary Terms, says: "An important precursor of feminist criticism was Virginia Woolf, who, in addition to her fiction, wrote, "A Room of One's Own" (1929) and numerous other essays on women authors and on the cultural, economic and educational disabilities within what she called a "patriarchal" society that has hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities" (234) [1, 2]. Virginia Woolf was herself the victim of patriarchal society. Woolf and her siblings were according to her brother Quentin Bell: "were home-schooled by their parents and several private teachers; unlike her brothers, she and her sister Vanessa were not sent off to school after their elementary school years" (Quentin, 26-27). So it was easier for her to sympathize with the deprived feminine gender. Laura Marcus, in her work Virginia Woolf wrote in the prologue: "Woolf is undoubtedly the central figure in the English-speaking countries for feminist literary criticism, and A Room of one's Own remains a key text for an understanding of women's place in literary tradition and history" (Marcus 1) [3]. First published in the famous literary journal of the 1920s The U.S. Forum Magazine, "Women and Fiction", traces the reasons why women novelists achieved limited success throughout the history of literary classics, more precisely, throughout the centuries. It unveils the fact that women novelists failed because they were financially dependent on men. Women were not free to think intellectually. Women novelists failed to succeed just because they were not allowed to enjoy the worldly experience to the fullest. Women, in Victorian England, should be judged as Kate Millet writes in her book, Sexual Politics: "The Victorian belief in marriage - nearly an article of faith - is an attempt to beautify the traditional confinement of women at any cost[4]. The Victorian feeling was that the female must relinquish sexuality if she is to be in any sense autonomous. It is a variant on the bondage of "virtue" which demands sexual inhibition in a woman if she is to maintain her social and therefore economic position" (91).

II. DISCUSSION

"Women and Fiction" is one of those two lectures delivered by Virginia Woolf at New Ham College and Girton College at the University of Cambridge [4]. Woolf's famous essay, "A Room of One's Own" was based on her two lectures entitled "Women and Fiction". She wrote on artistic theory, women's writing, literary history, the politics of power and whatnot. Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of the Humanities, Yale University says in the "Introduction" of Bloom's *BioCritiques*: "Woolf has become the high priestess of feminist literary criticism since she insists that the creative power of women "differs greatly from the creative power of man[6]." In Chapter 1: *Thinking of Ourselves: An Introduction to Feminist Theorizing of Contemporary Feminism Theories* edited by Steve Jackson and Jackie Jones it is said: "While there were certainly important feminist thinkers writing earlier in the twentieth century, such as Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, the rise of Second Wave feminism provided the impetus for a rapid growth in feminist thought" (Steve Jackson and Jackie Jones, 3)[7]. Naomi Black in *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* declares Woolf as feminist by saying that before the Second World War and long before the second wave of feminism, Virginia Woolf claimed that women's experience, particularly in the women's movement, could transform society[8]. "Fiction" according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary: is "A type of literature that describes imaginary people and events, not real ones" (573)[9]. Virginia Woolf, in "Women and Fiction" tries to inquire why there was no writing done by women writers before the eighteenth century? Then, she raises the question: "Why did they then write almost as habitually as men, and in the course of that writing produce, and one after another, some of the classics of English fiction?" (Woolf 76)[5]. Woolf here tries to explain that women started writing like men during the eighteenth century because they got an unfavorable environment so that they could share their feelings with the reader. Before the eighteenth century, the history of England was the history of men, not of women. Their fathers used to be soldiers, sailors, and lawyers but their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers were reported by historians as beautiful, red-haired, or once kissed by a queen. Historians enlisted them as married to someone and had several children: "Anyone who should seek among those old papers, who should turn history wrong side out and so construct a faithful picture of the daily life of the ordinary woman in Shakespeare's time, in Milton's time, in Johnson's time, would not only write a book of astonishing interest but would furnish the critic with a weapon which he now lacks" (77). Whether women enjoyed freedom at that time or not, is difficult to know. How many children does she have? Whether she had her own money or not, if she had a room to herself, whether she had servants – These questions matter a lot when we measure her success or failure as a writer. Virginia Woolf informs us that women's writing throughout history was not regular. There were spaces of silence that separated one period from another. She asserts thus: "There was Sappho and a little group of women all writing poetry on a Greek island six hundred years before the birth of Christ. They fall silent. Then about the year 1000, we find a certain court lady, Lady Murasaki, writing a very long and very long novel in Japan[10]. But in England, it is in the sixteenth century" (77). Woolf finds out the fact that women were dumb during the sixteenth century when the poets and dramatists were extremely active. She informs us that Elizabethan literature was dominated by males only and she termed it "exclusively masculine" (77). It is the end of the eighteenth century and the first part of the nineteenth century that announced the extraordinary frequency and success of women writing and women writers. Woolf investigates the reason why women were so late in this field. She claims that it is law and custom that stopped women writers. Women were not allowed the freedom of choice when choosing their life partners. They were beaten by their parents if they denied marrying the person of their parent's choice. Famous translator and editor of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, H. M. Parshley while writing the "Introduction to Book Two" of *The Second Sex* informs us: "The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways, but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being: Reared by women within a feminine world, their normal destiny is marriage, which still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon the solid economic and social foundation" (*The Second Sex*, p.31)[11]. Present patriarchal society always tries to marginalize the position of women in such a way that they are always considered weak, and inferior to men. Adrienne Rich, an eminent anthropologist says: "Patriarchy means the power of father- the total system of family, society, ideology, and politics of male which is regulated by active force or customs, traditions, legal language, norms, behavior, education, and labor division[12]. What role should be played by women is determined by the men and women are always subjected to men" (Adrienne, p.57)[12]. Women had no time for writing because they had a lot of obligations. It is the nineteenth century that heralded the outburst of fiction written by female writers. Woolf says: "Women of the nineteenth century had some leisure; they had some education. It was no longer the exception for women of the middle and upper classes to choose their husband"(78)[5]. So the changed law and custom allowed women of all classes to come forward with their pens and cherish their dreams and aspirations. Woolf in "Women and Fiction" tells us about Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot. She tells us that though women started writing, they started with writing novels and they wrote fiction. Woolf says in this regard: "Fiction was, as fiction still is, the easiest thing for a woman to write. A novel is the least concentrated form of

art. A novel can be taken up or put down more easily than a play or a poem" (78)[5]. Woolf explains that women had a lot of work to accomplish at home and outside the home. She informs us that George Eliot had to nurse her father; Charlotte Bronte had to pick the ice out of the potatoes. Woolf considered Charlotte Bronte to be the most talented female novelist of her time, but her writing has got some scars from her suffering. "In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf proves it: "she left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend some personal grievance" (79) [2]. So, it was difficult to write without certain intervals. That is why female writers according to Woolf: "was trained to be a novelist and not to be a poet" (79)[5]. Woolf explains why the novels of Joseph Conrad deal with adventures and seafaring and Leo Tolstoy's novels deal with soldiers and war. Their writings are outcomes of their experience. Women writers were not allowed to go and fight for their country. They were not allowed to go seafaring. So, it is obvious that their novel will deal with middle-class drawing rooms or gardens outside the home. She notes: "No first-hand experience of war or seafaring or politics or business as possible for them" (79)[5]. Woolf claims that their emotional life was regulated by the so-called laws and customs. She informs us that George Eliot was scandalized for living with Mr. Lewes without being his wife. She was forced to withdraw herself into a secluded life which influenced her work also. But Tolstoy lived a free life as a soldier with men and women and Woolf says: "For which nobody censured him" (79)[5]. Woolf then tries to explore the contents and the subject matters of the male and female writers. She reveals the fact that when men were writing freely, women were conscious of their rights and were writing to get their equal rights. Subjugated female writers were writing and telling the stories of female characters, who were fighting for their freedom, for their rights. Woolf says: "In *Middlemarch* and *Jane Eyre* we are conscious not merely of the writer's character, as we are conscious of the character of Charles Dickens, but we are conscious of woman's presence of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights" (79-80) [5]. The fight for someone's right is present in female writer and it is absent in the male writer as they face no such issues. Male writers fight only when: "he happens to be a working man, a Negro, or one who for some other reason is conscious of disability" (80) [5]. Woolf then opines that one needed a very serene and strong, powerful mind to ignore the temptation to anger. Jane Austen and Emily Bronte had the power to ignore the scorn and censure and Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot failed in this regard: "One sees the effect in Charlotte Bronte's indignation, in George Eliot's resignation" (80) [5]. According to Woolf, most of the female writers of that time had to adopt a view in deference to authority. That is why their writing lost the perfect integrity, which is the most essential quality of artistic work. But the situation changed and Woolf records: "The woman writer is no longer bitter. She is no longer angry. She is no longer pleading and protesting as she writes" (80) [5]. Woolf is happy to announce this great change. She says that woman's writing will have little or no foreign influence. The female writer will now concentrate on her vision. She will be no longer distracted by law and custom. Aloofness and seclusion will be replaced by socialization. This activity will make her writing more reliable, more genuine and more interesting. Woolf finds out the fact that a woman will become a successful writer when she will have the courage "to surmount opposition and the determination to be true to herself" (81) [5]. Woolf, while investigating, found out that the values of a woman writer are different from the values of a male writer. Women writers try to alter the established values of men when they write. Her opponent will not like this for sure. They will declare that the attempts of female writers are weak, trivial, and sentimental because it differs from the values of men. But the female writers ignore all these and begin to respect their sense of values. Woolf, in "Women and Fiction", declares that the early nineteenth-century women's novels were mostly autobiographical. They discuss their suffering, their agonies. They desire to plead their cause. But now, Woolf records: "This desire is no longer so urgent, women are beginning to explore their sex, to write of women as women have never been written of before" (82) [5]. Woolf says that until now women in literature were the creation of men, but it is high time women got their actual position in art as well as in life. Woman writer should overcome all the difficulties and chart the life of women like as Virginia Woolf [13-15]. Male writers never examine the characters. Her life was anonymous. For the first time, the country is beginning to explore woman's life in fiction. Woolf says: "A woman has also to record the changes in women's minds. She has to observe how their lives are ceasing to run underground; she has to discover what new colours and shadows are showing in them now that they are exposed to the outer world: (82). Now female writers will not explore the individual lives, but she will analyze the society and the lives of others. Her attention will change its direction from the personal to the impersonal. Thus their writing will become bolder and richer.

III. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Virginia Woolf had a big heart of love for women writers and she wanted to see the destiny of female writers established notably in the form of novelists but also poets, critics and historians. She prophesies that a golden age will come when women will get their cherished demands fulfilled through the things that have so long been denied their leisure, their own money and last but not least – their room for themselves.

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