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Breaking Barriers: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and the Feminist Pursuit of Creative Freedom

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Abstract: The article exposes how Woolf vividly illustrates the societal constraints, through the imagined figure of Judith Shakespeare, that stifled women's talents, juxtaposing Judith's unrealised potential against her brother William's celebrated success. Woolf underscores how financial dependence and relentless domestic demands limited women's literary contributions, steering them toward forms like the novel, which could better accommodate interruptions. The essay's narrative also examines gendered subjectivity, challenging patriarchal constructs in language and identity. Woolf adopts a fictional narrator to universalise her arguments, emphasising that women's struggles transcend individual experiences. Her metaphor of the spider's web highlights the delicate balance between fiction and material reality, revealing the pervasive impact of economic and societal limitations on literary creation.

Keywords: feminist literary criticism; gender inequality; women in literature; creative freedom; economic independence; privacy; gendered subjectivity; patriarchal constructs; literary history; societal constraints; intellectual freedom; feminist theory; twentieth-century feminism; women's rights; symbolic representation; financial dependence; creative space.

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1. Introduction

A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf is an important essay for the twentieth-century feminist movement. It analyses women's history in literature and the essential conditions, both social and material, for writing. These conditions include privacy, economic freedom, and free time. They are key details in this essay since throughout history, women in literature were denied these necessities. Woolf makes a solid start, as one of the most famous lines from the essay can be found in Chapter One: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4; ch.1), serving as the writing's thesis. Our culture has embraced the title's expression, "a room of one's own", to the point where it has almost developed into a cliché. With this book and this line especially, Woolf has sparked one of the most crucial declarations of feminist literary criticisms. The commonly held belief that women's works of literature are inferior to the ones that their male counterparts write, must also take into consideration the circumstances in which women are supposed to work. The reality is that they were frequently given limited time and space to be able to create original works, while also facing many interruptions. Their lack of time comes from the excessive domestic tasks they have, while their economic situation arises from the fact that they are financially and legally committed to their husbands and children. Women had few options to improve their circumstances, as they were denied having a room of their own. The author's argument was revolutionary at the time, even though this is a historical reality, and people were forced to face their terrible social situations. The basic theme of *A Room of One's Own* is that every woman requires her own space, which men can enjoy without reservation. A lady would have the time and space to write without interruption if she had her own room. Women did not have access to these luxuries during Woolf's time.

2. Judith Shakespeare: A Symbol of Unfulfilled Potential

According to the narrator, money is the biggest factor that stops women from getting their own room, hence having money is critical. They had ambition, originality, talent, will, and inspiration, but they did not have enough financial resources. "Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time . . ." (90; ch. 6). Woolf tries to explain why there were so few successful female poets. Women were more likely to create novels than poetry, as working on a novel allows you to have numerous interruptions, without irreversibly ruining work. She explains that the lack of a private space is why women choose to write novels instead of poetry, not the lack of creativity. As women were financially dependent, they could not afford a room of their own to use

as a working place. The stereotype that male writers were more successful than women derives from the difference in payment there was between male and female employers. To debate this idea, Woolf decides to look back in time and analyse the framework in which women are being judged.

Given the conditions in which women were treated at that time, she understands that there were slight chances they could have matched men's literary talents, the playing field being highly unbalanced. To support this idea, the narrator creates the persona of Judith Shakespeare, William's twin sister who is equally talented and intelligent as her brother. She uses this character to show how women are discriminated against by society. The difference between them is marked by the fact that a woman's talent is not warmly received by society, nor given the minimum work conditions, and while William can enjoy fame and recognition, his sister is treated in a totally different way. While their family and the rest of society appreciate and support his abilities, Judith's are undervalued and reduced in importance. Judith is ashamed of the fact that she writes and keeps it a secret. Because she gets engaged at a young age, she implores her father not to marry her, but instead of receiving sympathy, she gets maltreated by him and eventually kills herself. Judith's tragic image and fate are invented to demonstrate that a woman with Shakespeare's genius could never have the fame and success he enjoyed. Women were valued differently.

In *A Room of One's Own*, after the narrator is interrupted, she struggles to reestablish her concentration and cannot continue working efficiently. Hence, she implies that women who do not have a space of their own without distractions have a higher level of difficulty and chances to unsuccessfully finish their work. In the first chapter, the narrator's attention is caught by a cat without a tail while she is describing Oxbridge University. She steers her material in a new direction by noticing the weird appearance of the cat. And so forth, the reader experiences how it is to be in a woman writer's shoes and lose your line of thought just by the shocking and unexpected image of a cat without a tail. The narrator has lost sight of her initial statement, despite making a fascinating and essential remark about her luncheon mood. This shift supports her argument that women, who have neither a private space nor the time to write, are unable to seek the same prize as men, who are not obliged to strive for these kinds of essentials.

An important theme touched by this essay is the subjectivity of the truth, the narrator pointing out that even history itself can be subjective. Woolf is looking for "the essential oil of truth" (22; ch.2), but she cannot seem to find it and she ultimately comes to the conclusion that it is not real. Afterward, she starts writing: "When a subject is highly controversial, one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold" (4-5; ch.1). She dramatises her speech to convey the theory that a person's perspective is the only

thing they can genuinely “prove”, adding, “Fiction is likely to contain more truth than fact.” (3; ch.1). Reality itself is shaped by the conditions of one’s environment, it is not objective. This thesis further confuses Woolf’s story: she compels the reader to question the validity of all that she has portrayed as true so far, while also claiming that the fictitious aspects of any story carry more fundamental truth than the genuine components. With this remark, she reinterprets the established truths and viewpoints of innumerable literary masterpieces.

3. Gendered Language and the Shadow of "I"

Furthermore, besides covering the need for material conditions for women to reach the position of writing subjects, the essay examines the reader status of women. In relation to the gender semantics of the first person, it presents important problems regarding gender and subjectivity. “Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or any other name you please - it is not a matter of any importance.)” (3) is a statement that appears in Chapter One. The text maintains its ambiguous and mysterious tone questioning the narrator’s real identity. The author and the narrator are two different entities that are both dealing with the same matters. The narrator is a made-up character created by Virginia Woolf, and she maintains her real identity unknown. In this quotation, she actually dictates the reader to call her by various names. The narrator’s lack of a single “true” identity presents the essay with an air of universality. It consolidates the idea that these principles apply to all women, not just one. The narrator’s absence of a single identity also adds to her credibility. She surpasses one singular mind by adopting multiple identities, and as a result, she establishes herself as an opponent with a lot of influence of ability. Her casual attitude towards something that most people believe is set and of big importance - identity - is a source of her fascination.

Anne Fernald, the author of “*A Room of One’s Own, Personal Criticism, and the Essay*”, has a strong opinion regarding Woolf’s statement: “Why is *A Room of One’s Own* taken so personally by so many readers when it is full of devices designed to distance Virginia Woolf from the speaking voice of the essay? [...] Woolf writes a personal criticism that does not compromise her privacy, that, in fact, conceals it even as it enters into a conversation with the reader which seems very personal.” (165). She reinforces the idea of distancing the voice of the narrator from the author’s private experiences. If truth be told, Woolf presents the reality of those times, and none of her arguments are influenced by her personal recollections. Even from the beginning of the essay, the author detaches herself from the ideas that she is going to expose. She has a desire to make explicit the fact that she talks on behalf of all women, regardless of their name or social status.

The narrator compares the differences between men's and women's University backgrounds and decides to go to the British Museum and investigate 'Women and Poverty' within a patriarchal framework. She concludes that "women have served all these centuries as looking glasses.... reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size". Woolf discusses women's constrained, inferior involvement in the patriarchal subject in this passage. She provides a more specific example of this later in the book when she outlines the obstacles faced by a female reader finding the first person pronoun in 'Mr. A' novels:

"a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter 'I' . . . Back one was always hailed to the letter 'I' . . . In the shadow of the letter 'I' all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman (83, ch.6)."

When a male writes the word 'I', it appears that a woman is placed in its shadow, almost like women are not allowed to write or utilise the first person singular in English. This shadowing and deliberately ignoring of the feminine in the depiction and creation of subjectivity not only underscores the estrangement experienced by female readers of writings written by males but also emphasises the cognitive challenges for female writers in attempting to convey feminine consciousness when the language with which they must work appears to have already denied them access. The theory suggests that when the word 'I' occurs, it already denotes a masculine ego, without even taking into consideration that it may imply a feminine self.

4. Virginia's Web: The Spider's Metaphor for Literary Creation

Another important point in Woolf's essay is the image of the spider's web. The narrator employs it as a metaphor for the support material of literary writings and it has become well-known in literary criticism as 'Virginia's web'. It is conceptualised in the part in which the writer proceeds to investigate the Elizabethan period's seeming lack of female-authored literature:

"Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in midair by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to the grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in." (35; ch.3)

I think that fiction, like a fragile spider's web, is thin and immaterial, yet it must be grounded in reality in order to be discernible. Sometimes webs appear to float in mid-air by themselves, and it is difficult to tell where the web is tied to when fiction is so near to reality. When we try to track down the locations where the frail silks intersect, the presence of the web becomes obvious, while floating in the air. The ability to weave a web necessitates the spider's skill. Virginia Woolf's art gives the impression that her webs are suspended in mid-air. Her webs of expression demonstrate that life may survive without materialist attachment. Even without mentioning anything humanistic, her elegant style exposes the deeper implications of life. She communicates in metaphors and paints images in the air. Her work is very symbolic and inventive, written so beautifully. Her knowledge of how to use words in such a poetic way and her revolutionary feminist notions is what make her one of the best twentieth-century authors.

5. Conclusion

The basic theme of *A Room of One's Own* is that any woman requires her own space, something men can experience without reservation. A lady would have the time and space to write without interruption if she had her private room. Women did not have access to these amenities during the author's time. There continued to be something difficult for women to encounter and, consequently, their work deteriorated. Virginia Woolf is concerned with more than just the room itself. She presents the room as a symbol for a variety of wider themes, such as privacy, leisure time, and financial freedom which are crucial components of many gender inequalities. She declares that women will continue to be considered second-class citizens until these discrepancies are addressed, and that their literary accomplishments will be labelled consequently.

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