

**Advocating Woman's Rights in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*:  
A Feminist Approach**

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**Abstract**

It is crystal clear that Woolf's works are mostly advocating woman's rights. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate woman's rights, freedom, and economical independence in Virginia Woolf's novel, *A Room of One's Own*. Also, the paper pays particular attention to the special ways Woolf explains role of women in the novel as well as her view about feminism. Then the main themes of the novel and women's life have been discussed and analyzed. This research will be carried out by employing feminist and analytical approaches in analyzing the novel.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf; feminism; rights; novel; modernism.

**Introduction**

The title of this research paper is an analytical study of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Virginia wrote many novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* in 1929. She talked about the role of women in the social life. If they were to enter the professions', must not only obtain legal equality, but also eliminate the ideological barriers to success (Whitworth 1992).

Virginia was able to identify and serve the beginnings of real modernism in England, and separated it from Paul Edwardian times and also connected it to the social and public transformation (Edwards 132).

Modernism is the period in the history of English literature that began in the 1900s until 1940s. Generally, modernist writers rose up in the twentieth century against storytelling, and instead, they used to tell many individual stories that illustrated dispersal of society in during World War I. The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed an international revolution in the arts, as a wide range of cultural groups, aesthetic movements and individual writers and artists sought to extend and transform their relationships with representation of reality (Parsons 11).

Daily Life in Britain in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has two different sides.

On one side, there were recessions inside the country. At the same time there were two world wars, which were destructive. On the other side, there were big improvements. For example, in 1914 only 20% of the society was middle class but in 1930 this ratio increased to 30%. If we talk about the social life of women in 1918 only women above the age of 30 were allowed to vote but there were demands for equality between men and women regarding their jobs and salaries. Until 1984 a new law was made for equality of salaries for men and women. In the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century employment was low and only a few amounts of people were living in a good way. They could buy food, oil, and clothes. Except these they couldn't even buy a newspaper. Only the rich people could use electricity for lighting. Other people couldn't afford this so they were using gas. Despite this, in 1940 between 10 families only one family had a car. Regarding time for rest, in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century there were no rest days for workers. But later, some improvements occurred and there were 4 weeks for rest in a year.

### **Virginia Woolf and Feminism**

Virginia Woolf's view was about social rights, economic rights, and independence of women the same as men. During the Victorian time a woman could

not grow personally due to the tasks she was forced to do. Women during this time were forced by the conventional thoughts and dogmas. In these times only those women who were aristocratic and rich were able to study. Poor and middle class women were not able to study. House care, children care, and husband care were the obligations of a woman during these times. Women had to fight for their rights. That is what Virginia Woolf talks about in her famous book *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf's feminism was an attempt to avoid war and recover the tradition of female writing. Woolf's feminism was taken seriously by feminists especially the book of 'A Room of One's Own'. Woolf stated that the main concept of her works was her feminist thought. This changed the view of how Woolf was perceived. Virginia Woolf was regarded as an important writer by feminist critics. She had written many diaries, letters, manuscripts, and memoirs and talked about many biographical visions which later led she wrote in her own style. Woolf has written and studied many different things such as books, articles, newsletters, journals, and became active in societies, conferences, chat rooms, and networks. (Snaith, 102)

Virginia Woolf's book *A Room of One's Own* is one of the best feminist books of twentieth century. This book explains deeply the history of women in literature

through a very good method that contains material and social conditions of women. These conditions include financial independence and privacy. This explains the situation of women in literary tradition. Woolf explains the literature of women themselves and the theoretical and historical state of scholarship of women. In her essays Woolf stays against the hierarchies that are traditionally created and she also refuses the argument that is logically standard. Woolf writes women's history of thinking. Her essay is an argument and a reconstruction.

In 1920s Woolf wanted to see if writing will do the things that speech could not do for women, especially the participation of women in debates that are rational and critical. When her success in doing this increased, she was also aware of the barriers that were coming in her way such as the women writers that came before her time. In her novel *A Room of One's Own* Woolf wants to teach feminists to have interest in women writers that came before them through presenting a scene in her novel when women lay flowers on the grave of Aphra Behn as showing respect and appreciation of her works and writing as a professional writer as they say "we think back through our mothers if we are women". (Fernald, 95)

### **Representation of Women in *A Room of One's Own***

Virginia Woolf's book *A Room of One's Own* has many feminist messages. One of the messages is about the women that wrote fiction as she says "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". She also says that women should have privacy and freedom in order to be able to write. Woolf also believes that women are able to do even better than men when she says "women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." Through this she wants to give a message to women to think and act freely. Her message is clear because she writes with an engaging language.

Woolf talks about women in history in this book. She says that women were the main figures in ruling lives and slaves of the society and property of their husbands that is why they were always victims of men. In literature women were the source of many beautiful thoughts and inspired words but in real life their voice was not heard, as Woolf says in her book:

*Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from*

*cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact, she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (Goldman 2006)*

Woolf talks about the freedom of women in history. She says that women were not free to decide for their lives but men decided what women should do and what is right and wrong for them. She says that women were not free but were owned by men as a property and were not equal. They also couldn't resist the decisions that were made for their lives.

Woolf in this book says that because of having children women cannot make money and that is the reason they are poor. Then she says that in the past when a woman wanted to write she had to overcome many obstacles and circumstances. Women were married at an early age like the age of 15 then they had to take care of children and had no privacy. They had to bear children all the time. Women were also uneducated. She gives an example of Jane Austen as a writer who was writing secretly and hid her papers in order to not to be discovered. Women could not write well because they did not

have a tradition of writing to follow. Nothing was written to show the experience of women as Woolf says "however much one may go to them for pleasure. ... (They) never helped a woman yet, though she may have learnt a few tricks of them and adapted them to her use."

Woolf says that women in the past did not have literary tools to express the experience of women. They only knew to use those sentences that men use and these sentences were not good and suitable for women to use as Woolf says "a man's sentence . . . It was a sentence that was unsuited for women's use". She gives this example within the character of Mary Beton. Woolf argues that women should develop and use a feminine syntax and she says "the book has somehow to be adapted to the body". Woolf also says women did not have a female tradition for writing. Women only knew what their mothers knew as Woolf says: "for we think back through our mothers if we are women". (Goldman 2006)

### **A fictional Sister of Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own***

In this novel Woolf has created the character of Shakespeare's Sister; Judith Shakespeare who is a woman writer at the level of Shakespeare's literature. Woolf wants to talk about a woman if she was at

a high level of literature. Through the character of Judith Shakespeare shows the character of a woman artist or writer that is silent. She says that this woman has an ordinary life as a writer and not a separate life like ours as individuals as she mentions in this novel; "I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals". Woolf also states that Shakespeare's sister is a messianic figure who lives in people. (Goldman 2006)

Shakespeare's sister, Judith suffers from social oppression of gender inequalities. Judith who works as a writer has not much success in this field because she falls in love with a man who is an actor manager and as a result from their relationship she becomes pregnant. After that she becomes hopeless of her life and does not see any other choice and that is why she commits suicide as Woolf says: "lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop". From this story Woolf comes to the conclusion that if a woman wanted to write poetry she must have a room of her own and 500 pounds per year if not then she will be an unhappy woman and struggles with her own self and then leads to suicide. Woolf argues the inequalities between men and women in a patriarchal society by using fiction. She argues against the writers who say that there is equality between men and women and they cite facts and statistics

for it.

Woolf has always wondered why throughout history men had all the fame, wealth, influence and power while women did not have any of this except having children. She uses the character of Shakespeare's Sister to say that a female writer will come in the future at the level of Shakespeare and she must have two things to succeed and those are: money and a room of her own. Another aspect of this is the access of women to their own space. This novel was a step toward gender equality while at that time no one was writing about it and no one wanted to talk about women liberation. Women didn't write too much in the past because they were poor and did not have money while men had money and access to whatever thing they wanted.

Woolf gives the example of Judith Shakespeare as an educated woman at the level of Shakespeare. She wants to show that women also have the ability to write fiction just like men. She wonders what would happen if there was a poet woman in that time. Woolf also talks about the factors that contribute to the natural genius of the original Shakespeare himself such as the education at an early age, freedom of leaving home, ability to earn money and not having the responsibility to take care of family. On the contrary, Judith Shakespeare did not have a good

education, did not have freedom of expression and had to take care of family and children.

Virginia Woolf talks about many aspects of women's life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially the life of educated women and wrote about fiction. *A Room of One's Own* describes the difficulties that women experienced in the past and present. Some of the themes of this novel include; financial independence, freedom of mind and life of female writers.

### **Financial Independence**

Woolf talks about the importance of money for a woman if she wants to write and be a successful writer as she explains from the beginning of the novel "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". Woolf here describes the life of women at that time and shows that they did not have privacy of their own and enough money to live freely. It also shows the limited capacity of women at that time. Woolf focuses on the everyday life needs for a woman in real life.

She says that not only women need free time to write but also need money of their own by working and not depending on the money of their husbands or any other man for living. In order to have a room a woman should have money that is why money is the most important thing for

women. The reason women were oppressed at that time is because of depending on men for money.

Woolf wondered why there were a few female writers in the past. She says that the reason that intelligent women did not write well in the past was because they did not have money and freedom. For example, in this novel Mary Beton says:

*Indeed, I thought, slipping the silver into my purse, it is remarkable, remembering the bitterness of those days, what a change of temper a fixed income will bring about. No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds. Food, house and clothing are mine forever. Therefore, not merely do effort and labor cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. (Woolf's A Room of One's Own 32)*

This evidence shows the effect of money on woman's life. Women will always remain dependent on men if they do not have money. They will not be creative because they will always be judged and resisted by men. If women do not have money, when they write they will mostly write about their lack of privacy and lack of freedom and other negative concepts rather than subjects that they really want to write about as Mary Beton says in the novel

"One might say, I continued, laying the book down beside *Pride and Prejudice*,

that the woman who wrote those pages had more genius in her than Jane Austen, but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot". (Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* 58) This is another evidence that shows women were more concerned about her own problems rather than what they really wanted to write in their books. Jane Austen is an example in her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen is talking about her own problems at that time as a woman writer rather than writing what she really wanted to write.

According to Woolf money comes first in importance as compared to the other needs of women as she says "of the two – the vote and the money – the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important". (Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* 32) Here in comparison between the right of voting and owning money, Woolf chose money over vote. She wants to say that having money can lead to freedom of women and participation in politics in the future rather than vote.

Woolf believed that financial

independence is the way to the freedom of expression and being independent. She says that a woman writer can be creative if she has a space of her own and money to fulfill her needs.

### **Freedom of Mind**

One of the main themes in this novel is women's freedom of mind. By freedom of mind we mean freedom of writing and expression. In many scenes of the novel Woolf tries to deliver this message clearly to the reader. Throughout history this was the case for women as she mentions "Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for 200 years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry". (Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* 90) Here she obviously describes to which extent women's rights and freedom has been neglected. She says that in order to write poetry a woman should be free first.

Then, Woolf angrily states that women's freedom can never be stopped as she argues "lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, and no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind". (Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* 63) Here she wants to make it clear

that no matter how many obstacles are there her mind will always be free and nothing would stop her. Throughout the novel the word “a room” is repeated many times by which Woolf shows that women need freedom to write fiction. Woolf also says that women in the past only looked after children and did not have time for thinking and creativity and be free to express themselves as she says “I have no model in my mind to turn about this way and that. Here am I asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age, and I am not sure how they were educated; whether they were taught to write; whether they had sitting-rooms to themselves; how many women had children before they were twenty-one; what, in short, they did from eight in the morning till eight at night”. (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* 38)

In this novel Woolf states that women are writers and on the other hand she explains that how a woman becomes a writer. She gives the basic principles of writing which seems like a guide. She also proposes new ideas that cannot be accepted by the public.

Woolf states that in order to be a writer one needs time, money and freedom. She says that one should want to become a writer because that is what the person needs in order to be successful. She also mentions that in order to be free a

woman should have money of her own and should tolerate men and for this an example has been mentioned which is Mrs. Behn as Woolf states:

*Mrs. Behn was a middle-class woman with all the plebeian virtues of humor, vitality and courage; a woman forced by the death of her husband and some unfortunate adventures of her own to make her living by her wits. She had to work on equal terms with men. She made, by working very hard, enough to live on. The importance of that fact outweighs anything that she actually wrote, even the splendid 'A Thousand Martyrs I have made', or 'Love in Fantastic Triumph sat', for here begins the freedom of the mind, or rather the possibility that in the course of time the mind will be free to write what it likes.* (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* 53-54)

Here she explains that in order to write freely a woman must have her own money. The time a woman works like a man and makes her own money then she is free to write whatever she wants and no one can stop her. This woman Mrs. Behn worked hard after her husband died and she was responsible for her own life and also that was the reason she was free to write whatever she liked. She is free because she has her own money and no one can take it from her and she does not necessarily need to fight with men and act as their enemy she just has to communicate with them as

the other half. She also says it is not fair to blame the whole men for being the way they are.

### **Life of Female Writers**

In this novel Woolf describes the life of female writers in the past and the obstacles they had during their lives. Woolf says that there were intelligent women in the past at the level of Shakespeare but they were poor and did not have the chance to get good education as she says “for genius is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people”. (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* 41) This explains that there were intelligent women who were from poor families and they did not have the chance to become educated well and have enough money. Woolf gives the example of Judith Shakespeare to show this concept at that time as she says “reviewing the story of Shakespeare’s sister as I had made it, is 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”. (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* 41) Woolf here explains the fate of women who wrote fiction and she says their fate was suicide at that time because they were hopeless and sad about their life. Men were controlling women’s life and freedom.

Woolf also talks about the social life of women in that era. She gives the example of Jane Austen and shows how she sacrificed her social life in order to write fiction as Woolf says “She never travelled, she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself”. (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* 57) Austen has avoided these things in her life and that is the reason her fiction writings are great among people. Woolf also explains that Austen has written in a private situation and always hid her writings because she was forced to do that as Woolf states “If Jane Austen suffered anyway from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her. It was impossible for a woman to go about alone”. (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* 57)

Another aspect of women’s life is their relationship with men. Woolf wants to compare their lives in this novel by raising some questions as she says “why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?” (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* 22). By asking these questions Woolf wonders the difference of lives of men and women at that time. She attempts to fight for women’s rights and equality between the genders. She mentions that what women has did in the past for serving men is the reason that men are seen superior as

she says “women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size”. (Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* 30) This explains what women did for men and how it affected the image of men in the society. She says that women has always been this way and did not achieve what they really deserved and the advantages were always for men.

### **Conclusions**

In this novel Woolf mainly talks about the freedom of woman in expressing her thoughts and in order to achieve this freedom she has to be financially free and not depend on man. Woolf talks about those women writers who has written in the past secretly and were not able to write freely that is why the name of the novel is “*A Room of One’s Own*” which clearly shows this issue of women who were intellectuals and that they needed a private space for themselves to write and express their thoughts. Woolf says that money is the most important thing for women in order to depend on themselves and be free of men. She also gives a fictional example of an intellectual woman at the level of Shakespeare and names her “*Shakespeare’s Sister*” but this character does not succeed like the real Shakespeare because she gets in love with a man and

becomes a mother and her only task is to take care of her children. That is the reason she fails in writing fiction. This shows how Woolf talks about women in the past and the reason why they didn’t write much in fiction even with a natural ability.

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