

The Right to Personal Privacy is as Precious as the Right to Live as Presented By Virginia Woolf

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Introduction

Virginia Woolf is popular as a writer whose merit mainly centres on her candid observation in writing. She is undoubtedly a pioneer, in her own style. The literary world regards Woolf as a modernist and feminist who defined the early stages of what were then nearly unheard of, budding movements. Her narrative style ignores the linear or sequential recording of events and instead focuses on a 'stream of consciousness' style. Woolf presents analogies and gives a lot of importance to the internal musings of her narrators or characters, thereby infusing more to the story than would be possible by casual observation.

About the Book

'A Room of One's Own' is an essay that explores the contribution, conditioning and requirements of women with respect to literature. Throughout the book, by taking up examples of placeholder characters who are either entirely fictitious or poorly concealed facsimiles of real-life figures, Woolf instructs her readers to focus on the concepts she is trying to convey and not to waste time on trivialities like names and allusions. The essay tries to dissect the core problem from a different perspective, establishing that the lack of women's contribution to literature has far deeper causal factors than what is evident to the eye.

Understanding the Conditions

With the voice of a narrator who muses about the contribution of women in literature, Woolf brings the reader directly into the vortex of her main point. She casually establishes that there is a problem, whereas her contemporaries had been constantly declaring otherwise. Once that has been done, she goes about finding the probable causes, instead of blaming men alone for the conspicuous lack of women's contribution in literature. The essay then proceeds to analyse the conditions that led to very few women being able to produce quality literature – inviting her readers to form conclusions as to who might be the cause of the deplorable condition of women who were glorified as materialistic possessions in the world of men, leading to a paradoxical situation akin to a golden cage.

The View from a High Ground

While analysing the writing of men, especially on women, the narrator, Mary, sees how their words are fuelled by anger and resentment. Had those men been dispassionate in discussing women and forming the characters, the narrator observes, she would not have gotten so angry on reading the books.

Positioned with a comfortable inheritance herself, allows her to be able to afford at least a few things like privacy and a room of her own. The narrator observes the condition of women writers around her who were not all as fortunate as her or placed in conditions that allowed them the freedom to write. Woolf was, herself, a benefactor of an inheritance. By this narration she absolves herself of anger and instead shows that she is comfortable enough to not be resentful towards men and has the curiosity to observe and derive conclusions.

The Lack of Firm Insistence, A Powerful Narrative Style

Woolf clearly veers away from insinuations and blaming only men for the deplorable conditions of women. In fact, she apparently sympathises with both the sexes for their condition in the society, insisting that they were conditioned to conform to certain roles expected of them. But she also stands firmly against sexism. She accepts the actions as a by-product of many causes, but she does not agree with them.

The thin line of difference is vital not to polarise her readers and either agitate them or lead them to a righteous indignation, evoking emotions that will result in her point being missed. She asks her readers to observe, as she has herself done, and says that the names and means don't matter as long as the concept is understood. She says, 'Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping.' (chapter -one, pg.no-4)

The Condition of Women in General

Having established powerfully that she herself is not in a position to be angry at the injustice meted out to women and asking the readers not to waste time on trivialities – and observe or question the world around them, Woolf goes on to discuss how the condition of women in gilded cages is curbing not only their creativity but their entire existential freedom, depriving them of basic rights to property and wealth of their own.

If the mothers and grandmothers before her time had insisted, the narrator wonders, would things have been different for women? With this subtle observation she puts forth how women lack the financial freedom to own or use property and are instead left at the mercy of men who are caretakers and decision makers. The end note of this observation also hints at how none of this is because the women are incapable, but because they are never given the chance.

The Devaluation of Women's Capabilities and Work

The narrator also observes the disparity between the crediting of men and women, and the sexualisation of jobs that both are designated for. The narrator establishes that domestic labour does

not have any economic values, and even loses its cultural value 'from decade to decade'. This gross difference could be – should be – eliminated for women to find an equal standing. Once there is no gender-based division of labour, she wonders, would women be better placed to exercise their creativity and may produce that would get them praises and recognition like the work of men does for them without these shackles.

The Paradoxical Status of Women in Theory and Practice

On the subject of women being regarded as possessions and conquests instead of being rightfully recognised as people of their own value, the narrator declares, "A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. ...Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband." (page no- 43, chapter 3)

To take this further, Woolf introduces the character of Judith, Shakespeare's sister who is equally talented but crippled in the opportunities provided. She is engaged at a young age, and when she requests not to be pushed into marriage, she is beaten and shamed into agreeing, forcing her to run away. From there she is ridiculed as she seeks opportunities in theatre and is impregnated, eventually dying, putting an end to what could have been a talent that would parallel her prodigal, famous, brother. This is clearly done to show how the world in general, and literary world in particular, treats men and women with different standards.

Creating a work of genius, she says, is difficult for both men and women, and is influenced by many factors including distraction and discouragement. But it is harder for women due to their social standing and lack of financial freedom which does not allow them even the privacy of a room of their own in which they could freely practice their writing.

The Writing from Women

From the few samples of women's writing, the narrator observes, only a few shine beyond the conditions they are put in. Even this literature is produced amidst women having to hide or destroy their works, she states. And this shows the importance of women having financial freedom and privacy that could let them explore their creative side.

Personal Privacy and Women

On the topic of women having the freedom to pursue their craft, Woolf states that it would be easier with a comfortable inheritance that would cushion them, and allow them the privacy required. Using writing as one exercise where women could have matched with men had they had equal opportunities. Woolf highlights the bigger problem – the lack of personal privacy for women that cripples their very existence.

Conclusion

In her subtle, classic style, Woolf regards writing as a window, a single point of focus using which she talks of the general condition of women at that age, showing her feminist leanings. She takes her readers on the path of observation, making them question the way of things like she had herself done, also showing that a change in social class does not in any way alter the shackles that bind women. The problem is not the absence of women writers, but rather the lack of privacy that led to this, among other things like place women in glorified cages, reducing them to mere conquests, mirrors using which men can reassure themselves about their worth. Women, she observes, have to fight for their financial freedom first, in order to achieve anything, including writing.

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