

## Virginia Woolf is a vocal as well as a pioneer of feminism

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### Abstract

*Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was an English novelist, essayist, biographer and feminist. Woolf was a multi dimensional talent, whose modernist style and feministic approach changed with each novel. Still she is celebrated as a pioneer of feminism and her works take a special place in women studies programs across the world. This paper examines feministic view of Virginia Woolf and her out of the frame life style which ended with a tragic death.*

**Keywords:** *Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's own, Bloomsbury group, Hogarth press, education, male domination.*

### Early life:

Virginia Woolf was born on 25 January, 1882, the daughter of sir Leslie Stephen, a celebrated essayist, editor and Julia prinsep Duckworth Stephen. She is a prolific writer who tells her audience in a lecture on women and fiction, "one minor point-a woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction". Prescribed requirements to be a writer is still very much out of reach for woman. Virginia Woolf's dance between literary expression and personal desolation would continue for rest of her life and her swinging mood with bouts of deep depression led to him a successful attempt of suicide. Virginia Woolf's feminist view fully expressed on her extended essay 'A room of her own', which based on two lectures given at Newham and Girton college, Cambridge, in 1928. Woolf firmly believes creative works depends on living condition. A sound and smooth living condition, especially financial condition very much needed for being a writer. The narrator's idea of mind is it contains both male and female part and for complete satisfaction and happiness the two must live in harmony. She believes, this fusion is 'androgynous ' as what Samuel Taylor Coleridge described.

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In this article Woolf invented a fictional character, named as Judith as Shakespeare's sister to establish that a woman like Shakespeare's genius would have been denied the same opportunities to develop them because the door was closed to women. While Woolf's brothers went off to school she stayed at home, like that Judith stays at home while William goes off to school. "She was as adventurous, as imaginative as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school". Trapped in the home, she kills herself and her genius goes unexpressed, while Shakespeare lives on and established his legacy.

The title of the essay 'A room of one's own' comes from Woolf's conception that financial freedom will bring women the freedom to write; "in the first, to have a room of her own .....was out of the question unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble". Woolf also give emphasize on personal liberty to create art.

Like other people's thinking of the era, Woolf's father, Sir Leslie Stephen, believed that only the boys of the family should be sent to the school. Her father did not believe in investing in the education of his daughters, she was deprived from the experience of the formal schooling. But she was allowed access to her father's extensive library and determined to be a writer from an early age.

#### **Unconventional according to her era:**

Virginia Woolf led a very unconventional lifestyle according her own era. Even she deliberately supports lesbianism. "Then may I tell you that the very next words I read were those -'Chole liked Olivia' ... do not start. Do not blast. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that things sometimes happen".

Sometime women do like women. Woolf's has a lot of close friends, who are largely young ages, shared stimulated her intellectual interest. They started meeting for 'Thursday evening' at Gordon square, London in 1906, which was soon followed by Vanessa Bell's 'Friday club', to discuss and share idea of contemporary arts. These two literary and artistic circles were known as famous 'Bloomsbury group'. Though this group had no clear philosophy but its members share an enthusiasm for leftist politics and a general willingness to experiment with new kind of visual and literary art.

In 1911, Virginia dares to take a decision to live in a house in the Bloomsbury neighborhood with several men, none of whose was her husband. Peoples around were very shocked and surprised including her father's old friend Henry James who found her lifestyle rather too bohemian.

#### **Woolf's creation:**

Major theme of Woolf's fiction is the radical difference between the 'modern' world and the 'Edwardian' one, or more broadly the world before and after the First World War when human character began to change. About 1913 Virginia had been writing her first novel *The Voyage* but because of another severe mental breakdown after her marriage, it was not published until 1915 by Duckworth and Co.

In 1920 she contributed an introduction to Victorian photographs of 'Famous Man and Fair Woman' by Julia Margaret Cameron. From the very early of her life Woolf had a nagging for publishing and editing.

Before that in 1917 the Woolf's had bought a small hand printing press in order to take up printing as a hobby and as therapy. According to Danny Heifman "if Virginia Woolf had never published a single word of her own, her role in Hogarth would secure her a place in history. Thanks to Woolf's tiny press, the world got its first look at the early work of Katherine Mansfield, T.S Eliot and Forster". In the meantime Virginia wrote printed and published a couple of experimental short stories, 'The Mark on the Wall' and 'Kew Gardens'. Her first collection of short stories 'Monday or Thursday' published in 1921. Her first experimental novel 'Jacob's Room' appeared in 1922. In 1925 'Mrs. Dalloway' was published, followed by 'To the Lighthouse' in 1927 and 'The Waves' in 1931. These three novels are generally considered her a greatest modernist writer. In 1928 'Orlando' was published, led by her involvement with the aristocrat novelist and poet Vita Sackville. Two talks to women's colleges in Cambridge in 1928 led to 'A Room of one's Own'(1929). Here Woolf declared that a small income and a quiet place to think is the basic necessities for a woman to be writer.

Virginia Woolf was a great reader. She saw reading "as a mythic act, not simply a cozy fireside pastime". Reviewing Woolf's work in 'Spectator', John Sparrow claimed: "she writes vividly because she reads vividly". She had an extra ordinary quality of writing letter. English critic V.S Pritchett said, "Virginia Woolf was a compulsive letter writer. She did not care for the solitude she needed but lived for news, gossip and expectancy of talk".

### **Virginia Woolf's feminist view:**

Woolf is unquestionably celebrated as a major writer and an early feminist, though her work was widely recognized nearly fifty years after novels were published. As a writer she is not bound to the informal structure of modernism, nonetheless she is championed today subtly calling women's issues. Woolf herself never went to the university and was granted few rights. Even in the realm of literature, she found women are expected to write memories of their father's or to edit their correspondence. In fact Woolf wrote a memories of her dead father and she later wrote that if her father had not died when she was relatively young (22), she never would have become a writer.

Virginia Woolf in her literary creation artfully criticizes many double standards of her day and she was too impressive to be ignored. Though her contemporary authors were writing about the violent events of the World War 1, she was writing its impact on domestic life and wrote 'Jacob's room'. For that Katherine Mansfield criticized her for not addressing war and politics directly. In 'Three – guineas', a book-length essay, written on eve of world war 2, she responded to a letter from a man asking how war could be prevented, to call attention to the fact that as woman her political ideas aren't valued. She replied, "behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immortality, its hypocrisy its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed."

Another contentious issue of her writing was the question of women's equality with men in marriage which she evoked in her 'To the Lighthouse' (1927). Here Woolf portrait the Mr and Mrs Ramsay on her parents. Woolf was determined that "the man she married would be as worthy of her as she of him". Due to her fear of marriage and the emotional and sexual involvement the partnership requires. After reject numerous marriage proposals through out her young age she accepted Leonard Woolf, a cadet in the Ceylon civil crevice. Though she once wrote to Leonard: "as I told you brutally the other day, I fell no attraction in you. There are moments- when you kissed me other day was one - when I feel no more than a rock. And yet your caring for me as you do almost overwhelms me. It is so real, so strange". Virginia at the age thirty eventually accepted and married Leonard Woolf in August 1912. However they did not have any children because of Virginia's unstable mental condition.

### **Sexual abuse and lesbianism:**

Woolf was the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of her half- brothers. She narrates this bitter experience in her memoir "Moments of being". In her time society had sexual social standard attitude in which woman lack of chastity treated as a serious social offense. Woolf raised her pen against this kind of social disparity. She saw that in her social structure man had access to and knowledge of sex, when as it was highly prohibited to women. Women in upper class were expected to remain ignorant of it. Sexuality to the women treated as a social taboo. Though Virginia wants that kind of literature that would treat sexuality and sexual life of women frankly, but her own works treated sex rather indirectly.

When describing the work of Mary Carmichael, a women fictional writer, Woolf deliberately invokes lesbianism; "Then may I tell you that the very next words I read were these - 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". Here Woolf gave references from Radcliffe Hall's lesbian themed novel, "The Well of Loneliness" published in 1928. This novel created a huge public uproar and Hall had to face an obscenity trial. But Woolf was also not very much comfortable when

Discussing this theme, she has to be assured that Sir Chartres Biron the magistrate of Hall's obscenity trial is not in the audience: "Are there no man present? Do you promise the figure Sir Chartres Biron is not concealed? Wearer all women, you assure me? Then I may tell you..."

Woolf arrived to the women's college with her lover Vita Sakville - West, we discuss her later, and she is comfortable discussing lesbianism with women student because Women College is safe and essential place for such discussion. Jane Marcus, feminist critic and Woolf scholar, thinks, Woolf was giving direction and suggestion other writers of how to discuss lesbianism tactfully enough to avoid obscenity trials; "Woolf was offering her besieged fellow writer a lesson in how to give lesbian talk and write a lesbian work and write a lesbian work and get away with it".

Virginia Woolf's relationship with women was a contentious issue of her time. Women gave her warm companionship and literary stimulus than man. She had deep relationship with many women like Violet Dickinson in her young age; in her thirties Katherine Mansfield; and in her fifties Ethel Smyth. But all of them her close friend only Vita Sackville West aroused her emotionally. Though Vita was very much different from Woolf; in all senses like social class, sexual orientation and politics, it developed into the deepest relationship that Virginia would even have outside her family. Even Vita was no so much intellectual to be a member of Bloomsbury group. Virginia felt that Vita was a real woman: "there is some voluptuousness about her; the grapes are ripe; and not reflective in brain and insight she is not as highly organized as I am. But then she is aware of this, and so lavishes on me the maternal protection which, for some reason, is what I have always wished from everyone". Then Woolf wrote the fictional biography 'Orlando' reflecting their relationship and the protagonist based on 'Vita'; only with a change about from one sex to another. Woolf got Vita's physical appearance embodied both the masculine and feminine, and she wrote to Vita that 'Orlando' is "all about you and the last of your flesh and the lure of your mind". Eventually their love affair lasted for only three years, Woolf wrote 'Orlando' as an "elaborate love letter rendering Vita androgynous and immortal, transforming her story into a myth".

### **Modern Elements:**

Virginia Woolf is an accomplished as well as successful modern writer in two senses; writing style and subject matter. She was very much ahead of her time. In fact her views of feminism are still out of reach. Just two years ago, America's just former president Barack Obama, called America is still lacking equal pay for women. Whereas Woolf wrote about the detriments caused by gender influenced salaries long before the call to change legislation. In 'A Room of One's Own' she famously explains that without financial freedom, women cannot possess full creative or intellectual freedom. At that time she had a strong belief in the power of the individual. She writes "take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions ..."

Woolf was many steps much more ahead than her time. Still in this 21 century many of her feminist view is a dream for woman. What we can see in the United States election, where one of the main cause behind Democrat candidate Hilary Clinton's fall is just because of her gender. Our modern society still wants that a woman should not poke her nose in politics which Woolf wrote almost hundred years ago. Woolf responded a letter from a man asking about Second World War she clearly declare that woman's political ideas are not valued. "She lived in a time when she was granted few rights -but turned the setback into strength", cited from Maddi Crum in her article "why Virginia Woolf should be your Feminist Role model".

Woolf lived in a time when nobody even herself never thought about their right but her writing concern "the problem of equality at access to goods that have traditionally been monopolized by man", as Jessica Seventeen a Pericles Lewis. Another two concerns of her later feminist writing are: demand of female writing and remove the gender difference. In 'A

Room of Ones 's Own' (1929), Woolf woman is notable to write because of their relative poverty; only financial freedom will bring women the freedom to write: "In the first place, to have a room of her own..... was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble". Just for being a woman Woolf was left without the experience of formal schooling whereas the boys of her family were sent to school. Virginia Woolf was more than just a women writer, she was a great observer of everyday life; said by Danny Heitman. Sometimes Woolf is pigeonholing as a "women's writer" and her books meant to be studied rather than enjoyed. But, in her prose, Woolf is one of the pleasure givers of modern literature which transcends gender. Michael Cunningham's novel 'The hours' retell so Woolf's classic fictional work Mrs. Dalloway won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1998. This novel adapted as a film in 2002 of the same name, where Nicole Kidman acted as Woolf. Kidman dimmed a false nose to mute her perfect face, evoking Nigel Nicolson, Woolf family friend, once described her as "always beautiful but never pretty".

In her creation, Woolf not only looking at a subject, but looking through it. We can see sea figure is very much prominent in her fiction, it's perhaps a metaphor for a world in which the currents of the surface can be the reality and the under sea world is depth that goes downward for miles.

Woolf raises the possibility of a specifically feminine writing style. She said the great female writers, "wrote as women, not as men write". But later she emphasizes that greater writer should be androgynous. And Woolf is unquestionably an androgynous writer who is able to see the world equally from a man's and a woman's perspective. T.S Eliot describes in his obituary for Virginia "without Virginia Woolf at the center of it, it would have remained formless or marginal .....with the death of Virginia Woolf; a whole pattern of culture is broken".

### **Mental illness and suicide:**

Virginia had her first mental breakdown at her 13 when her mother died from rheumatic fever in May 1895. In 1904 her father had died and it caused her second severe breakdown. During this time, she first attempted to suicide and was institutionalized. "All that summer she was mad", according to Quentin Bell, her nephew and biographer. In November 1906, her close brother Thoby Stephen died of typhoid fever and had a similar effect on Woolf. Virginia was a normal woman but she could not take any kind of shock or change normally. Any kind of life altering events provoked her madness. Lee explainers, "she was a sane woman who had an illness". Woolf symptoms goes with the manic - depression illness profile or bipolar disorder.

Leonardo, her husband and life long companion categorized the breakdown into two stages; "in the manic stage she was extremely excited; the mind race; she talked volubly and, at the height of the attack, incoherently; she had delusion and heard voices... She was violent with her nurses. In her third attack, which began in 1914, this stage lasted for several months and ended by her falling into a coma for two days. During the depressive stage all her thoughts

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and emotions were the exact opposite of what they had been in the manic stage. She was in the depth of melancholia and despair; she scarcely spoke; refused to eat; refused to believe that she was ill and insisted that her condition was due to her own guilt; at the height of this stage she tried to commit suicide”.

Woolf's famous novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, as she described a study of insanity and suicide; the world sees by the sane and the insane side by side. Here she uses the language of medicine, degeneracy and nervous breakdown, which she frequently heard at the time of her illness.

Virginia was sexually abused by her older step brothers but it was not widely known until after her death. This darker experience shadowed Woolf's youth and this trauma might have complicated her mental health. Her biographer Reid notes: “Virginia was a manic-depressive, but at that time the illness had not yet been identified and so could not be treated”. For her, a normal mood of excitement or depression would become inexplicably magnified so that she could no longer find her sane, balanced self. “The only way I keep afloat is by working”. Woolf confessed. “Directly I stop working I feel that I am sinking down, down”.

Through out her life Virginia took at least three attempt to suicide. After every death of her close people she felt her own life begin to crumble. After death of Lytton Strachey in 1932 and the suicide of his life long partner Dora Carrington shortly thereafter, Virginia felt them specially missed Lytton acutely in her life and writing. After completing her novel 'Between the acts' Woolf become depressed as she felt it was “too slight and sketchy” ; and distrusted her publisher's praise of the novel. During this time Woolf was realizing that without writing she could no longer fully exist. It was “a conviction that her whole purpose in life had gone. What was the point in living if she was never again to understand the shape of the world around or, or able to describe it”?

In her last letter to her husband Leonard, Virginia writes, “I feel certain that I am going mad again: I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voice, and can't concentrate”. At first on March 18 she attempted to drown herself and failed. After a week later Virginia walked the half mile to the river Ouse, filled her pockets with stones and walked into the water. It was on March 28, 1941.

Almost a month later her body was found by some children on April 28. “Suicide with the balance of her mind disturbed”. Was the verdict of inquiry which was held in the next day after her body found? On April 21 her body was cremated with only Leonard present and her ashes were buried under a great elm tree outside the garden of monk house. Her epitaph was taken from the concluding words of *The Wave*, “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!”

Virginia Woolf was born in a wrong time with right views and was too impressive to ignore.

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