



DECONSTRUCTING THE CLASS POLITICS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate "A Room of One's Own" from a Marxist feminist standpoint to point out that while Virginia Woolf has upheld the cause of the liberation of the upper-middle-class women necessitating for them to have a room of their own where they could sit and think and write independently, she has ignored the laboring or the proletariat women of her times primarily because her upper-middle-class status and distance from the working classes made her focus upon her class only inculcating bias in her mind against the lower class women.

The study explores how Virginia Woolf focuses on the continuation of the discriminatory treatment of the women of her subsequent deprivation of her human, social, legal, economic, and existential rights. She uses very skillful, ironic, sometimes bitter, emotive as well as subversive language to challenge the authority of the discursive nature of many gendered norms of society communicating a very clear message that women can no more be kept alienated from the mainstream cultural and existential rights, and they must struggle to make the demand of room of their own a material reality so that they may achieve the true freedom and emancipation for which woman has been longing since time immemorial and emancipated human beings like their fathers, husbands, and brothers, their privileged counterparts. Although she champions the rights of women in her fiction and faction, and through her lectures as well as feminist activism, she seems to have done unprecedented work about the emancipation of women, yet her prominent stature in Victorian society and her alliance with white (upper) middle-class society seems to have precluded her from incorporating working-class women's issues in her fiction and faction, that has resulted in a torrent of criticism against her from the Marxist Feminist critics whose foremost indictment of her work is that she has voiced the concerns of white, upper middle-class English women only.

Key-words: Deconstructing, Class-Politics, Liberation, Proletariat, Discriminatory, Existential, Fiction and Faction.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) has been acknowledged as one of the pioneers of the modernist as well as the feminist movement. In her experimental novels, short stories, essays, and critical writings, she has secured for herself a prominent niche among the leading figures of modernist literature. The scope and appeal of her oeuvre have been unending. As a sworn enemy of gender inequality, she projected an inflexible stance on the ossified social structures that refused to accommodate non-conformist attitudes on homosexuality, gender, and women issues, and it is for these reasons particularly that her work is continuing to be explored from modern and post-modern perspectives. Woolf's contribution to the debate of gender politics, suppressing patriarchal ideologies, normative social values, and gender division based upon exploitative ideologies has been universally acknowledged. More than any other female writer of the 20th century she has shed light on the issues related to feminism. Because of the prolific work she produced on the question of female existence throughout history to the present times, she became the most prominent writer of the 20th century and came to be regarded as the foremost feminist writer whose influence upon the contemporary.

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Being the daughter of an upper-middle-class intellectual family, and the recipient of the rich intellectual cum literary tradition of the “Bloomsbury Group”, she had never to worry about domestic labor, unlike many working-class women. Though she did not have the fortune of attending universities education unlike the male of her society as higher education was exclusively supposed to be the business of the male class, she still had the privilege of partaking in intellectual debate and discussions upon various topics of the public sphere that the prominent members of the group were engaged in during their meetings at her father’s home. She developed her critical thinking through voracious readings in her father’s library as well as through expressing, sharing, and discussing her thoughts freely with the intellectuals of the Bloomsbury group which she was a member of, and that helped her in widening her vision.

Besides producing fiction of enduring fame and value, Virginia Woolf has also written memorable prose essays and faction. Her renowned book *A Room of One’s Own* which saw the light of the day in 1929 was considered by many a manifesto of feminism, though a group of radical feminists has taken issues with Woolf’s feminist assumptions declaring her a fake feminist. The book, therefore, is the collection of two of her most important lectures in which she comprehensively discussed the discriminatory conventions of gender division throughout English history.

Research Questions

1. Why does Virginia Woolf not include working-class women in her advocacy of the cause of emancipation of women in *A Room of One’s Own*?
2. How does Virginia Woolf’s own belonging to (upper) middle class affect her vision of feminism in *A Room of One’s Own*?

Literature Review

In *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, Lois Tyson (2006) articulates the meanings of the term by saying that it relates to the author’s life on the text he/she has produced and he, further, explains that to discover and understand the text better, the author’s biography, factors influencing her life, socio-political circumstances of his/her times must be taken into account because the writer is very much the product of his/her age and cannot isolate himself/herself completely from the social milieu. Tyson’s views on the need of foregrounding writers’ biographical and sociological accounts are particularly important in the focused elaboration of *A Room of One’s own* since the question of erasure of working-class women from the said discourse cannot be adequately addressed without considering Woolf’s life events.

Alison (2007), in her work: “*Mrs. Woolf and the Servants: the Hidden Heart of Domestic Service*” discusses comprehensively the history of domestic service in England. She goes on to describe that until 1945 because of the absence of professional opportunities for women. The foremost profession opened for women was household service that was approximately eighty percent of the domestic staff. It shows how carefree was the life of the upper-middle-class women. The only thing these women didn’t seem to have was access to university life and participation in the political and intellectual activities of the day because a certain degree of prejudice against women and their ascending status in the society made men feel that they can keep the women subordinated by disallowing economic independence to them.

Society is not a matter of coincidence but a very much cultural creation as the conceptualization of the women’s identity, her roles, and social functions she performs in the society is not something given or divinely ordained rather this is the result of the discursive construction of her womanhood and the social roles. It is, therefore, easy to understand that

the gender roles in society are determined and defined by the desires and needs of the society, and these needs and desires, without any doubt, are male-centered. Women, the half of the sky, are often seen from the eyes of men as if they had no desires and needs of their own. In European capitalist societies of the 19th century, when it was important to keep going economic markets for which laborers were in demand, the women were encouraged to partake in economic activities, not as a way to transform their lives, but as an agent to keep the economy going. The purpose of this short background was to create the context in which Virginia Woolf demanded economic independence for women of her time. In the discussion mentioned above, reasons probably could be found why Woolf encouraged women to take up the front seat and drive the destiny of women by enabling them to enter the honorable professions i.e. womanhood as well as economic labor, imposed on them. Her support and encouragement of the women for economic as well as cultural independence was quite a fresh idea and had wide appeal for women as a woman, regardless of class. The women were brutally confined to the domestic service, albeit, their roles slightly differed. Woolf believed women cannot achieve existential freedom, economic and psychological emancipation unless they break free from the shackles of domestic restrictions and take part in cultural, political, intellectual, and existential activities. She believes women's restriction to domestic or household tasks is primarily responsible for her inferior position in society. Her so-called biological and social inferiority is only a cultural creation, a discursive reality constructed by the dominant male for the perpetuation of their hegemony, otherwise. If she is given equal opportunities, they will perform as efficiently as men. This is the reason why she explicitly denounces the division of the sexes in the *A Room of One's Own*.

What matters, however, from a woman's perspective, is who has dictated this division of spheres. Remaining closed in the domestic sphere was, of course, not a woman's natural desire as it was showed to be, rather these were the dominant men to decide for women what to do and what not to do. On the face value, it seems that women as a whole are the object of Woolf's statement, the closer analysis entails the problem of the precise section of the society that Woolf addresses in this statement: who were the women in Woolf's mind when she made this statement? She had upper-middle-class, white women in her mind whom she wanted to gain intellectual freedom and an uninterrupted private space so that she could reflect over the issues of her life and produce arts, but for this to happen for upper-middle-class women, another group of women, i.e., lower middle class or working women had to stand back. This is precisely the division between upper and lower-middle-class women that Woolf created and, with class bias, ignored the overwhelming majority of the domestic or working-class women. Marxist Feminist, criticizing this prejudiced feminist stance of Woolf, takes issues with her feminist agenda. It follows that the feminist agenda of the upper-middle-class woman's liberation was realized at the expense of working-class women and in particular women serving as domestic staff. Woolf for her partial support of the upper-middle class cannot be said to be the true champion of the rights of women. The domestic working class is badly ignored by her in her spoken and written discourses. This is exactly the insight of this study: It unveils the theory and praxis of inequality and points out the elitist nature of Woolf's feminist agenda in *A Room of One's Own*.

As pointed out by Light (2007), Woolf was, obviously, because of her upper-middle-class raring, oblivious of the drudgery of domestic work and chores that the women of the domestic working class were subjected to, therefore, in her elitists' feminist discourse we do not hear any echo of the concerns of domestic staff. Light (2007) further explains that the performance of independent intellectual work necessitated the employment of domestic staff to do the menial work, implying that upper-class women's liberation was actualized at the expense of the lower class. The liberation of mind envisioned by Woolf as a pre-requisite for

the emancipation of women necessitated the tending of the bodily needs by the domestic staff, the laboring women.

Marxist Feminism, associated with the ways to look at the economic exploitation of women throughout history, is an influential theory that left a deep impact upon the cultural trends of the society. The foremost reason for the use of Materialism feminism instead of Marxist feminism is because the latter is supposed not to be able to address the complexity of the ideas involved. Marxist Feminism deals with the condition of women simply on economic considerations, leaving aside the important gender and linguistic implications of the situation. Therefore, given the inadequacy of the term, Material Feminism is used to refer to the material as well as gender-oriented issues of the women's ontological problems. What accounts for the efficacy of the term Materialist Feminism is the rationale that Marxist Feminism was primarily and fundamentally a patriarchal ideology dominated by the male-oriented interests and gaze at the socio-cultural issues that, therefore, was unlikely to bring any considerable material change in the position and status of women, it was, therefore, needed that philosophy fully cognizant with the issues of the womenfolk should be originated so that the female existential, economic and social problems may be adequately addressed from the purely feminine stance. Materialist Feminism, with its renewed and potential emphasis upon the need of reviewing women's existence, especially from the economic viewpoint, makes it more useful than Marxist Feminism, which, being the male-oriented philosophy of life, stressed upon the working-class male of the world to get united so that they may overthrow the yoke of capitalistic exploitation and actualize their existence according to the dictates of free will. Materialist feminism, with its conceptualization of the women's reorientation into a world that is characterized by the exploitation of men and women, focuses on the realignment of the feminine world, wishing the amelioration of the feminine state.

As the above stance illustrates women's position throughout history has been determined in terms of her being useful in perpetuating the generations, and the reason for giving her this role more important than any other role was simply because she satisfied man's desires both for sex and generation as a domestic slave without protesting against his tyranny. Furthermore, her role of procreating the generations also accounts for the comparatively better status of the mother of the male children primarily because such a mother was valued for having created the heirs of the social system. As it gives increased importance to the material conditions of the women when it comes to seeing the happiness of women in any patriarchal society of the world, Material Feminism envisioned the material happiness and intellectual uplift by affecting drastic changes in the educational curricula designed for the inculcation of ideologies, because in Marxist ideology these were only men who were the victim of economic and material exploitation, while it was taken for granted that women, being weaker and being confined to the four walls of the house, were not running any risk of exploitation at the hands of a capitalist male. Materialist Feminism, deviating from the essential points of Marxism, took into consideration the female's inclusion into the working class following the world wars which reduced the world population considerably and necessitated the participation of women in the working class, and, therefore, on the lines of Marxism, it visualized a comprehensive program for the uplift of the women by ensuring that they would no more be subjected to the exploitative shackles of the patriarchal social lords. In the late Victorian age as well as in early Modernism, the only options available to them were the domestic staff of the upper-class women. Since the university education was not open to them and they had no access to the professions as well. The Victorian dichotomy between the professions and the roles specified for men and women persisted in the subsequent ages as



well that lead the Materialist Feminists to formulate the new thinking revolving around the factual, materialist conditions that would ensure the betterment in the life of a woman.

Hennessey points out that since women work in households mostly, or even when they are incorporated into the mainstream economy, their economy is considered valueless and, hence, their existence and position in the society, by implication, are also considered marginal.”

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative research carried out within the framework of Marxist Feminist theory, fiction, and history. It is an interpretation of the many-sided Feminist arguments made by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* and Marxist critique of her ideas. The Marxist Feminist critical discussion of the ideas is supported by textual evidence. After the extraction of the data, it was meticulously sorted out and carefully categorized. Finally, Marxist and Feminist theories are applied to analyze the data to address my research questions. Finally, detailed conclusions are drawn from the critical discussions.

Deconstructive Marxist Feminist Analysis of the ‘A Room of One’s Own

What we propose to do in this chapter is the deconstruction of Virginia Woolf’s seminal feminist text from a Marxist feminist perspective. This study talks of her advocacy of female rights. and the need for women to attain cultural, psychological, and economic emancipation in an otherwise dominant patriarchal society. It is primarily so because Woolf came of a respectable and economically sound middle-class intellectual family where her father Leslie Stephen, a famous author of the national biography of England, brought her up in the intellectual environment of the Bloomsbury group, that nurtured Woolf literary and critical abilities to the profound extent, and she came to be regarded as one of the foremost modernist feminist writers of her time. Whereas her elitist domestic social and intellectual background provided her the opportunities to grow into a mature and talented writer of fiction and faction, however, on the other hand, her upper-class roots deprived her of insightful investigation of the issues of the working class that is why we find her feminist writings wanting in the conceptualization of the working-class women.

In this regard, Elaine Blair in her article, *The Horror of Dirt: Virginia Woolf and Her Servants* illustrates that an intellectual woman writer’s emancipated mind requires the domestic, working-class women to cater to her bodily needs, therefore, what seems to be a well-intentioned program for the uplift of the women was a biased enterprise meant only to liberate the upper-class women at the expense of the lower class.

What can be concluded from Woolf’s rather ambitious campaign of the need for the female writer of *A Room of Her Own* as well as economic independence is that she was wishing the betterment of one group of women at the expense of the other: for the prosperity and success of the upper class writing women, lower-class women had to remain uneducated, sacrificing, working slavishly for one of their group. The perspective of Woolf’s class bias as pointed out by Blair indicates that Woolf’s Feminist proclamations were plagued by class prejudice. The deconstruction of her feminism indicates how she leaves out, advertently or inadvertently, a huge number of women belonging to the working class, remaining oblivious to their existence and issues. One is tempted to think whether she is different from the male members of the exploitative patriarchal system who thrive at the expanse of working-class men because her support of the one class also leaves one wondering was she not, in one way propagating the division of sexes. In her case, this division of sexes becomes a division of classes within the same sex.

Blair takes up another perspective and questions whether Woolf’s use of Shakespeare’s imaginary sister Judith whom she intends to stand for women, in general, is not exclusively



from class perspective: can Judith be made to represent Woolf's maid also whose function was to facilitate the upper-class woman by easing her from her domestic duties so that she could concentrate on artistic work? The answer is definitely 'not' because imaginary Judith, as much talent and genius as men, cannot be a maid, for being a maid she would have no time nor a room of her own to accomplish the artistic and intellectual tasks. Thus, the deconstruction of a room of one's own lays bare the effect of domestic and social circumstances upon Woolf's ideological assumptions and lets us see how the working-class woman in her times was an object of as much exploitation as she had been in the past. As the Marxist criticism and theory would claim the prevalence of class system in any society divides the subjects into bourgeoisie and proletariat irrespective of their gender, Woolf's assertions in *A Room of One's Own* for women to be able to stand by their own reveal her unintentional bias for her class.

A Room of One's Own touches another crucial point: Poverty of women juxtaposed with the poverty of men. With the consciousness that women had never had the comforts and joys of life enjoyed by men, Woolf raises a crucial point that why it is that women drink water and men drink wine, and that, what is the impact of this distinction of gender on the intellectual production,? That is, upon the quality of fiction produced. A deconstructive insight into these questions asked by Woolf reveals that Woolf was thinking of economic disparity between the two sexes of the same class, remaining undisturbed about the lower class women, taking it for granted that she had been destined to live as poor as she was. For this point Woolf seems to have disregarded this crucial reality that women belonging to the lower classes and the working classes, who are included in the domestic staff of the elites, are, after all, women, and, hence, cannot be ignored just because of their class. This statement, without any doubt, refers to the fact that without the domestic staff taking care of the needs of the female writer, she would never have been able to perform the creative tasks, this is, however, because of class bias that Woolf has only cared about the welfare of and mentioned the upper-class women excluding working class from the category of welfare. The message is that only the women of the upper stratum are imbued with the faculty of creative writing while the working classes are innately deprived of this ability, suggesting, therefore, in an almost imperialist tone, that nature had divided the women according to class and birth. Since the definition of the middle class could be determined by economical criteria, it seems probable that Woolf was deeply influenced by her class roots when she stressed the economical and mental liberation of only one class-excluding the majority. The effect of class seems to be so pervasive, and, by implication, corrupting in the case of Woolf that perhaps unknowingly she refused to accept the working-class woman as a creature like her. This is paradoxical to note because in her ambition to elevate the economic and social status of upper-class women by recommending for her the provision of a room of her own as well as five hundred pounds per annum, she forgets the fact that the majority of working-class women had the difficulty to even count the money because of no education.

Woolf's repeated references to "middle class" in *A Room of Her Own* strengthens, on one hand, the viewpoint mentioned above, and on the other hand, it reflects upon Woolf's thinking that she had only one class of women all the time in her mind when she was conceptualizing the ways to emancipate her.

Reference to the middle class quoted above demonstrates Woolf's preoccupation rather obsession with the idea of the financial and hence existential betterment of the class she belongs to. Not only does she refer to the middle class in the quote above but throughout the text, we can find the world middle class pouring out of her mind in quiet excitement. The more she stresses the need of safeguarding the interests of her class, the more she becomes a victim of ignoring the overwhelming majority of the working class and this discriminatory



viewpoint of hers implicates her more with the bourgeoisie and less with the proletariats. The tag of her being a foremost feminist of the 20th century becomes tarnished in the light of her rather ambitious advocacy of upper-class women. One is tempted to believe from the repeated use of the world middle class by Woolf that her vision of emancipation of women was severely restricted by her upper-middle-class biases. Woolf's repetition of, and hence emphasis upon middle class is obvious from her favorable appraisal of the women writers of the previous centuries who belonged to the middle class. These quotes indicate the nature of this discourse and the image of women Woolf wanted to improve. Repeated and conscious use of the word "middle class" is not an ordinary thing to have happened rather this word comes out with all psychological, material, cultural, and class implications, explicitly betraying Woolf's one-sided view of women's liberation. Exclusion of the vast majority of working class women from her discourse implies Woolf's willing suspension of the idea of projecting the cause of working-class, therefore, the history of suppression of working class women at the hands of men and upper-class women continues through Virginia Woolf as well. This is where Woolf becomes a victim of her criticism for excluding and erasing lower or working-class women from history. Woolf, in her unintentional blindness to working-class women, becomes a victim of the criticism she hurls at male historians who intentionally and purposefully excluded women from history.

Conclusion

In concluding comprehensive discussion in the previous chapters about how and why Woolf remained blind to the concerns of working-class or domestic staff women who constituted the overwhelming majority of women of Woolf's time, we, in the first place, partly agree with Robinson when he declares that the essential insight into the feminine classic of one of the greatest feminist minds of the Modern era, that is, *A Room of One's Own*. Since in the light of what has been mentioned in the foregone chapters about the systematic history of suppression of women, especially the working-class women, it follows that apart from deprivation of economic rights, the working-class women had been victimized by the upper-class women of their gender. Therefore, to say with Woolf that by ensuring financial independence and provision of a separate room for women where they could reflect and write upon the matters of grave importance does not seem to be the solution because by so doing only one class, not more than a drop in the ocean, will benefit while the multitude of women belonging to lower or working-class orders will remain deprived, suppressed and forgotten as ever. This statement provides insight into the matter that Woolf's preference for economic and intellectual liberation of women over political rights may be obtained later only after economic independence has been gained. Finally, the study concludes, in the light of the insights gained into *A Room of One's Own* read with deconstructive Marxist Feminist approach amalgamating the socio-historical aspect of Woolf's age and biographical aspect especially focusing upon her upper-middle-class associations, that Virginia Woolf focused exclusively on the financial, social, intellectual and psychological liberation of (upper) middle-class women and completely ignored the cause of lower or working-class women because of social bias.

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