

Tracing the History of Women Through “Shakespeare’s Sister” by Virginia Woolf



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Abstract

From Mary Wollstonecraft to Julia Kristeva, the definition of feminism has changed immensely over the ages but the main ground for this theory is the “demand for equality amongst all individuals”. “A Room of One’s Own” is a remarkable feminist work in the Modern Age. In this essay Woolf demands that every woman should be given her own personal space physically and mentally in order to express her thoughts and views; and thus, she justifies it rationally by giving examples and facts throughout the essay. “Shakespeare’s Sister” is the last chapter of this essay and it provides the perfect conclusion for her argument. Woolf tries to trace the history of women writers or just the history of a middle class woman from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century. She looks at the most seminal historical work by Professor Trevelyan, “The History of England” and to her surprise she finds only a page or two dedicated to the condition of women in those times.

Keywords: Feminism, Kristeva, Cyclical Time, Women’s History, Pseudonyms.

Introduction

Woolf poses very simple yet significant questions in the text:

Why is it that we never hear about women writers in sixteenth and seventeenth century? Why is their history not recorded by any historian? What were their lives like? Why is the fictional representation of women (in Shakespeare’s works, Webster works, Greek texts etcetera) different from their reality? Why is the historical fact different from imaginative reality? And are we fed historiography in the name of facts?

Woolf also argues that no person is a genius right from their birth rather the circumstances form or create a genius. Shakespeare was given a formal education which helped him become a genius actor and playwright.

This leads her to the fact that women were not given any formal education and were trained to run household instead. They were dehumanised by their parents and husbands and were flogged and beaten if they disobeyed any orders. Woolf then tries to imagine a sister of Shakespeare named Judith who had the same creative capabilities like her brother but her circumstances denied her any growth. And thus, Woolf takes us through Judith’s journey of trying to reject the concrete societal norms set for women and how she runs away from her wedding. Judith though runs away to become an actress but instead ends up with the Manager’s child and thus, ends her life.

Woolf argues that women writers in eighteenth century had to take up male pseudonyms in order to publish their works. Famous writers like Charlotte Bronte and Mary Ann Evans took up the pseudonym Currer Bell and George Eliot respectively. Popularity for women was equalled to promiscuity while on the other hand male writers were lauded for their works. The hypocrisy of the society troubles Woolf and prompts her to write this essay.

Aim of the Study

Woolf prompts her readers to create their own history, to create a history of women and this is the main aim of her essay. She wants to revive Judith Shakespeare in every female writer or artist. She wants her readers to dare to dream and to demand their rights. She wants a separate room (physically, mentally and emotionally) for every woman to express her ideas in any way.

The aim of this essay is to free ourselves from the shackles of patriarchy and class differences and to bring out more Jane Austens and Roberts Burns in the Literary history. The patriarchal domination has changed its position over the ages and hence, it has found new ways to

dominate the minority. Therefore, different definitions and waves of feminism has emerged, the core of their argument being the same i.e. "Equality". Mary Wollstonecraft in her text, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects" (1792) advocates the right of education for women giving the reason that this education will help women to educate their children and to run their households better.

We have come a long from the first wave of Feminism when Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic defined two different times "Linear Time" and "Cyclical Time" in her work "Women's Time"(1979) later published in her work, "New Maladies of the Soul" (1993). Kristeva argues that women undergo a different time known as the "cyclical time" because of their menstrual and reproductive cycles and the hormonal changes during these cycles. She explains that female subjectivity will be better understood if we look at both the "cyclical" and the "monumental" (eternal) time. It is relevant even to Woolf's argument regarding the depiction of facts and history. The patriarchal and colonial system records history linearly completely ignoring the history of women and the colonised nations as they are apparently living in a cyclical time. And hence, the lack of the history of women in major historical works that Woolf studies. Kristeva also prefers "individual identity" over "collective identity" as the "collective identity" fails to represent the actual domination an individual faces due to gender, race, caste and class. Woolf talked about women and their rights but was also very vocal about gay and lesbian relationships. She showed a powerful androgynous protagonist Orlando in her novel "Orlando: A Biography" which was dedicated to her lover Vita-Sackville West. The character Nick Greene also appears in "Orlando: A Biography".

Research Paper:

'At last Nick Greene actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with a child by that gentleman....'

'Shakespeare's Sister' is a selection taken from chapter three and the conclusion of the final chapter of the text "A Room of One's Own" written by Virginia Woolf in 1929. This text is considered an early landmark in modern feminist writing. 'A Room of One's Own' was based upon papers presented by Woolf at Newnham and Girton, both women's colleges at Cambridge. Woolf, a feminist writer tries to trace the history of women especially middle-class women in the sixteenth century through fiction. The conclusion she draws through it is that women had no place in history except some minimal references to 'an Elizabeth, or a Mary; a queen or great lady'. Since, most of the history is not about ordinary therefore, there are no available facts about women in the Elizabethan age.

In sixteenth century women were not considered as humans. They were a commodity to their fathers or their husbands. "Wife-Beating" was a recognised right of men as is explained by professor Trevelyan in his book 'History of England'. Women were flogged and beaten up for disagreeing with her

parents and were considered to be submissive. Acting taken as a profession by women was far too impossible. They were not allowed to act and express themselves and therefore, men had to cross-dress and act the roles of women on stage. It is queer to note that history which is only related with facts and is supposed to be presented the way it is, becomes historiography where we get to know only about those facts which the society in a way wants us to know.

To relocate history of women in the sixteenth century we need to go back to fiction. As fiction is like a web of spider which is grounded to reality yet it is imaginary. That is, fiction has its attachments to the fact since, it is attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.

Women in fiction occupied a very strong position. They were totally different from the women who lived at that time. Women like Rosalind and Lady Macbeth of Shakespeare did not seem wanting in personality and character.

As is explained by Woolf further-

"Indeed, if women had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of utmost importance; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater".

Why is there a discretion between history and fiction? Why is it that women appear so powerfully in fiction but so poorly in reality?

We come to a question of why was it that there were no women writers who were as famous as Shakespeare in that period. Women were certainly not given education. They did not study about Plato or Horace but focussed only on household chores. If she had a creative mind, it wasn't brushed up. It lay latent in her for years and years till in the end it suddenly diminished.

Here, in this chapter also Shakespeare's sister Judith as is created by Woolf, has that genius of Shakespeare in her. She had creativity to write and to act but like other women of that age, she became a prey to her situations. She did not study yet her genius mind made her scribble some very powerful lines. Her parents forced her to marry a wool-stapler's son but she fled away to pursue her dreams. She wanted to be free without any boundations on her. She had a taste of theatre and waited patiently to find a place in the theatre. The actor-manager, Nick Greene laughed at her and made fun of her. He compared acting by women with poodles dancing. He took pity on her as she was young. He did not take pity on her talent but only took her as an object. He ended up with her in bed. She bore his child and in the end in sheer frustration she killed herself. Nick Greene did not offer her a role rather he wanted to give her an appetite for sexual pleasure.

It is tragic irony. This irony is not about the lines written in this essay but it is an irony of situations. The situations which killed a highly talented and genius minded Judith who was capable of acquiring the same height of popularity which Shakespeare acquired at that time. It is well said that creative capacity comes with circumstances.

Woolf in her essay said-

Remarking An Analisation

"...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 in the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty."

She had to die as the society did not accept women who lost their chastity before marriage. Chastity is considered of utmost importance even in our contemporary times. There is a whole lot of instructions imposed on women to be chaste and to be a virgin. Society links the chastity of women to family honour and so it becomes a subject of utmost importance. It is well explained by Jamaica Kincaid, a writer from Antigua in West Indies, in her prose-poem "Girl"-

"On Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming."

There is a misogyny in society which imposes certain strictures for women. Their actions are considered to fall in two categories either right or wrong. This right and wrong is itself decided by the male-dominated patriarchal society. There is a strong urge to deconstruct this notion of right and wrong. We need to know that right and wrong contains something common in it.

As said by John Stuart Mill, a thinker and a philosopher, in his essay, 'The Subjection of Women', 1869-

"All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men. They are so far in a position different from all other subject classes, that their masters require something more from them than actual service. Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments..... They have therefore, put everything in practice to enslave their minds.... They turned the whole force of education to effect their purpose."

Women had to take up male pseudonyms to find a place in literature. Writers like Charlotte Brontë took pseudonyms of Currer Bell in order to publish her literary works and be accepted by the readers. Anonymity was something that women in eighteenth century wanted desperately.

Shakespeare's sister had to die in any way as, if she would have decided to live then the poetic talent inside her would have got torn vigorously in small bits and pieces. Women need to be financially strong to support their lives and to live freely at that time. They need a physical as well as a mental room of their own for least distractions. They need mental space to think freely.

Woolf in her essay has tried to bring the plights of women. She has tried to relocate history of women through fiction and through creating her own tragic fictional story of Shakespeare's sister.

In the end, a few lines written by Hannah More, a feminist writer, in her book, 'From the Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education', 1799-

"Girls should be led to distrust to their judgement; they should learn not to murmur at expostulation; they should be accustomed to expect and to endure opposition.... It is of the last importance their happiness, even in this life, that they should early acquire a submissive temper and a forbearing spirit."

Conclusion

The conclusion of this research paper is to bring awareness regarding the history of women throughout the centuries and to work collectively in order to change that and write a new history. Women need to be free from the shackles of patriarchy and class differences in order to bring these extraordinary changes.

Endnotes

1. "Shakespeare's Sister" 3rd Chapter in "A Room of One's Own" by Virginia Woolf published in 1929.
2. Mary Wollstonecraft's essay, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects", published in 1792.
3. Julia Kristeva's essay, "Women's Time" published in 1979. Later published in "New Maladies of the Soul" (1993).
4. Virginia Woolf's novel, "Orlando: A Biography", published in 1928.
5. "Girl" a prose-poem, by Jamaica Kincaid, published in 1978.
6. John Stuart Mill's essay, "The Subjection of Women" published in 1869.
7. Hannah More, "From the Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education" published in 1799.