



Reinventing Feminism: Balancing Rights And Responsibilities

Dr Sumaiya Sajid^{1*}

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shaheed Udham Singh Panjab University Constituent College, Guru Har Sahai, Ferozepur, Punjab, India. Email: sumaiyasajid2@gmail.com Contact No.: 9889081234

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf had analyzed the social construction of gender roles through her writings. Her prophetic vision made her perceive gender not as a contradiction but as a spectrum of identity and experience. She questioned the societal definitions of 'female' and 'feminine' that serve to define roles and rules, and she completely rejected both the notion of feminism and the label of feminist. Instead, she advocated the concept of the androgynous mind, which exists free from gender binaries and biases, with the aim of transforming society. Her writing offers a profound analysis of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal environment. Virginia Woolf put forward the need for material and intellectual circumstances necessary for women's emancipation that was creating room for women's voices and rebuilding institutions. She insisted on accountability and urged women to fight against oppressive power systems. She gave reasons for a total reinvention of identity, history, and culture. Virginia Woolf wished to see men and women working together for universal peace and freedom. The legacy of Virginia Woolf continues to inspire feminist thought, reminding us that the struggle for gender equality is not merely political but also deeply emotional and artistic.

Keywords: Feminism, gender equality, androgynous, power system, pea

Virginia Woolf, as a champion of feminist consciousness, explores themes of female rights and responsibilities in her works, particularly through the roles played by women in history, society, and literature. Her writings have challenged those societal structures that silenced women's voices and limited their freedom throughout history. Her work remains essential even today for its powerful criticism of gender inequality. She had the vision of a world that is socially, culturally, and intellectually more inclusive. In all her writings she focused on the issues regarding women's rights and responsibilities. She emphasised the point that women, after getting their due right to education and private income, should also embrace their duties as responsible citizens and continue to resist persisting and prevailing patriarchal norms. She also underlined the necessity for women to engage in the reconstruction, reshaping, and redefinition of both their individual identities and the broader world.

Through her writings, Virginia Woolf tried to search for the reasons behind women's subjection, which she found to be their economic dependency on men and lack of education and privacy. She concluded that women should have education and private income so that they do not have to depend on men for their expenses and have a room of their own where they can exercise their natural gifts without getting disturbed. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."¹ The idea of having privacy and money can be applied to a broader spectrum. Money and privacy open up new avenues, giving freedom to act upon one's wishes. Freedom to pursue the desired goal plays an important role in the substantial growth of a human being, whereas binding of any kind proves to be an impediment in natural development and progress. She insisted on intellectual and social equality and argued that women's rights, especially the right to education, financial independence, and creative freedom, are essential for them to obtain equality with men. The material circumstances, such as income and personal space, are crucial for intellectual development. She highlighted how systemic oppression kept women from accessing the same

¹ A Room of One's Own (2001), p. 2.

opportunities as men, especially in education and professional fields.

Virginia Woolf pointed out how women had been erased from cultural history, writing, “*Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.*”² By recovering these forgotten voices and calling for the reconstruction of history through a feminist lens, she insists that feminism must not only fight for rights today but also reclaim the silenced legacies of the past. *A Room of One’s Own* the most influential essay concerning female social identification narrates the history of women’s lack of means of education and opportunity and the effect of them on women’s mental freedom and capacities. It brings out the relation of women between social structure and individual lives, between material circumstances and personal development. The gradual emergence of women from dependency and oppression towards a position of equality and independence involves a shift towards another set of emotions. It is freedom from fear and freedom from hatred or bitterness on the part of the women, and Virginia Woolf invited women to celebrate and enjoy the freedom and femininity. *A Room of One’s Own* opens with a simple question, which actually was a topic of a lecture series that Virginia Woolf delivered at Newnham College and Girton College in October 1928: What is meant by “women and fiction?”³ Virginia Woolf was unable to find the truth about women and fiction, and the questions directed her to contemplate England’s social and literary history and women’s absence from it. She tried to pin down the factors and prejudices that were the cause of women’s subjugation and the rationale behind the dearth of women’s contributions in the fields of science, art, and literature.

In the history of human civilization, there had not been any great female philosopher, scientist, musician, painter, sociologist, historian, politician, or revolutionist; rather, men had a monopoly in these spheres. Did women lack brainpower, rationality, and aesthetic sense, which disqualified them from contributing in the social hierarchy? Though one cannot deny the occasional presence of female rulers, the truth is that they inherited the throne, and the credit for their achievements as rulers goes to men, as it is said that under queens, men govern. Virginia Woolf delved deep into English social history and tried to find out the conditions in which women lived through the ages. She read G.M. Trevelyan’s *Social History of England*. The description she found in Trevelyan’s history of England was shocking but true. It was nothing unbelievable because women across the world shared this fate of subjugation and suppression in all the periods of history, and in many places they still are going through it. No facts about women, except a queen or lady of rank, could be found in English history or anecdotes. Middle-class women who had nothing apart from brains and character found no place in chronicles. Naught was known about them till the eighteenth century. Although facts about middle-class men—what they ate or wore, how they spent their leisure hours, and the education and careers they pursued—are mentioned in Trevelyan’s history of England. Virginia Woolf realised that women had no existence save in the fiction written by men. There, woman was regarded as a person of utmost importance, various, heroic, splendid, and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous. But this was woman in fiction, as Professor himself pointed out that she was locked up, beaten, and flung about the room. The woman who pervades poetry from cover to cover is absent from history. In fiction she dominates the lives of kings and conquerors, but in reality she is a slave and property of the boy who forces a ring upon her finger. In literature she utters the most profound thoughts, however, in real life she neither could read nor spell.

History should be rewritten, suggests Virginia Woolf by discovering the lives of women hidden in parish registers and account books, so that “women might figure there without impropriety? For one often catches a glimpse of them in the lives of the great, whisking away into the background, concealing, I sometimes think, a wink, a laugh, perhaps a tear.”⁴ Virginia Woolf questioned why women did not write continuously before the seventeenth century. Why no woman wrote a word of that great literature when all the other men seemed to be able to write a sonnet or a song is a constant mystery. The answer can be found in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, in the lives of the obscure, and in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are dimly, intermittently discernible. Miss Julia Hedge, an angry feminist in *Jacob’s Room* researching working women’s statistics, is waiting for her books to be issued at the British Museum. She notices Lord Macaulay’s name being gilded and reads the names of other renowned men all over the dome. She thinks bitterly, “Why didn’t they leave room for an Eliot or a Bronte?”⁵ The history of England is the story of the male lineage claims Virginia Woolf, and only by understanding the average woman’s circumstances can we explain the extraordinary woman’s success or failure as a writer.

Virginia Woolf’s feminism was radical not only for her time but even by present standards. In most of her writings, she questioned binary gender roles and believed that creativity required an androgynous mind, free from the expectations of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity.’ She was searching through her life for something that she called on one occasion the ‘androgynous mind,’ the mind that should include both male and female qualities: “And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man’s brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman’s

² Ibid, 41.

³ Ibid, 1.

4 Ibid, 138.

5 Jacob's Room (2008), p. 66.

brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating."⁶ Virginia Woolf visualized that to bring peace and harmony to this world, an androgynous mind is needed. In order to make the world solid and whole, they have to come together. Only that way can they grow stronger. For in the vast canvas of this universe, male and female together form a very tiny, almost speckle-sized, yet significant, part. She argues that, "It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex... one must be woman-manly or man-womanly."⁷ This idea of gender fluidity in thought anticipated later feminist and queer theory, making Virginia Woolf a visionary voice in discussions of identity.

In the opinion of Virginia Woolf, a fusion of male and female mind and soul is needed for creativity. If one sex is distinct from another, it interferes with the unity of mind, so they both ought to come together. It is natural for the sexes to cooperate, as union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness. According to her, an androgynous mind is needed to set a normal and comfortable state of being: If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. When the fusion takes place, says Virginia Woolf, the mind becomes fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Neither a purely masculine mind could create nor a purely feminine one. The androgynous mind is resonant and porous; it transmits emotion without impediment, and it is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided.

It is widely believed that while one's sex is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concept of gender, the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in identity and behaviour; are largely cultural constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization. Either nature has made a great difference between man and woman, or the civilization that has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial, as it has remained consistently patriarchal. By this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be widely identified as active, dominating, adventurous, rational, and creative. The feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional, and conventional. He is positive and neutral. She is negative. He is self. She is other, an imperfect man, an incidental being. Man can think of himself without women. She cannot think of herself without a man. The two sexes have never shared the world in equality. In industry and politics, men have a great many more positions, and they monopolize the most important posts. It was male-centered and controlled and conducted in a way to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains—familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. Women are taught in the process of being socialised, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology of male superiority. They are conditioned, consciously or unconsciously, to derogate their own sex to cooperate in their own subordination.

Women's social, cultural, and political status is almost never equal to that of men; even when her rights are legally recognized, abstract, long-standing custom prevents them from being fully expressed in the mores. Virginia Woolf was forwarding the idea of getting back their rights in legal terms alone and pressing for cultural and psychological freedom for women as essential conditions for voicing their thoughts and opinions, the ability to think, create and express without fear or restriction. She hated those patriarchal structures that required permission or company for women to enter libraries, and not admitting them to colleges and universities, thus denying women access to education and inheritance. These limitations stifled female creativity for centuries. In *Three Guineas* Virginia Woolf wrote, "*Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.*"⁸ This is an open declaration of war against patriarchy and an assertion of the right to intellectual liberty, even in the face of institutional exclusion.

However, the point worth noting in her writings is Virginia Woolf believes that the right to liberty and equality is accompanied by moral and intellectual responsibilities. Their very first obligation is to question and resist the patriarchal structures that have limited them hereto. *Three Guineas* explores women's duty towards society and public life and their role in resisting war and fascism. She finds that patriarchy is unmistakably connected to violence and war, so women must challenge all these oppressive political, social, and historical systems. Her argument is that because women were never included in history and politics, they could de/re-construct all power structures with a fresh perspective. She writes, "*As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.*"⁹ She rejected nationalist identity, signalling her belief in a universal responsibility to oppose injustice and not to conform to the systems built by and for men. The need is to resist and challenge every conformance and traditional role is a way to propel society forward to usher in a new era where equality and justice are served to all, disregarding gender, creed, color, ethnicity, religion, and caste.

Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest spokesman of nonviolent resistance in the twentieth century, was a contemporary of Virginia Woolf. One could say that Virginia Woolf knew a little about Mahatma Gandhi's ideology. Her diary descriptions can, to some extent, provide the proof of it: "February 1931 My memory of

⁶ A Room of One's Own (2001), p. 84.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A Room of One's Own (2001), p. 94.

⁹ Three Guineas (2001), pp. 206-7.

today's headlines is: Gandhi set free."¹⁰ His writings and actions influenced many Western pacifists who were important to her, such as George Lansbury, the leader of the Labour Party from 1931 to 1935 and a believer in unilateral disarmament. Mahatma Gandhi's belief in nonviolent resistance as a way to prevent war was based on his conviction that its moral force would convert the enemy into a friend. Virginia Woolf ardently wished to convey this belief, but her realism rendered it unattainable. Although, to some extent, she also had encouraged resistance through nonviolent means.

Virginia Woolf subverted all concepts of glory and glorification related to war. She says that we must break the links between male glory and warfare and female glory and motherhood. Her reason is that if we are ever to undo the war system, we must dismantle the binary sex/gender system that she labels as the instincts and challenges the binary thinking "that attributes to men responsibility for war, to women responsibility for peace." She drew out the major difference between man and woman, which was the difference of being educated and uneducated. According to Virginia Woolf, women are not victims, but they are agents of change who can reshape society through critique, independence, and imagination. Women are globally recognized for their unique contributions to peace negotiations and post-conflict recovery. Their involvement in peace processes leads to more lasting and meaningful resolutions, as they often prioritize reconciliation, community welfare, and long-term stability.

Women are essential because they contribute to the emotional and caring aspects of family growth and well-being. They act as supporting pillars for emotional and mental health and interpersonal interactions. They also influence their children's moral and intellectual development because they instill virtues such as discipline, respect, honesty, and compassion. They provide emotional support and physical care to elderly family members. It is women who oversee the maintenance of the home, ensuring a clean and safe living environment. Women are an integral part of decision-making processes related to social development, healthcare, and education. Recognizing and valuing women's roles is essential for creating strong, just, and forward-thinking families. Mrs. Ramsay, the female protagonist, in *To the Lighthouse* is attempting to create a perfect world in which one can have peace of mind and free space to breathe, as well as space to grow and branch out. Her methodical actions provided others with the necessary energy and vitality to face life's challenges, "she went, punctually, directly. It was her instinct to go, an instinct like the swallows for the south, the artichokes for the sun, turning her infallibly to the human race, making her nest in its heart."¹¹ She resolves everything into simplicity. She can heal up and pacify anger and irritation. She can bring things and people together to create a moment of togetherness that can last forever in their memory, like a work of art.

As a wife, and a woman, Mrs. Ramsay, ascertains her individuality and is all set to show the light to the world, bearing her own burden and carrying the others' all along, "she made him feel better pleased with himself than he had done yet..."¹² With stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, she mends, patches, stitches, and brings peace and comfort all around her. A complete woman not only frees herself but also gives others what they want by solving their problems and harmonizing the world. "She was at least fifty; she had eight children. Stepping through fields of flowers and taking to her breast buds that had broken and lambs that had fallen . . . for he was walking with a beautiful woman." She is optimistic because she believes in her creative power, the ability to turn wrong into right, and the power of metamorphosis, "Perhaps you will wake up to find the sun shining and the birds singing." Roles have been reversed; women no longer require protection but instead provide men with strength and support, "I am guarding you—I am your support."¹³ Women can find shape in the midst of chaos and thus play an important role in shaping society. They are important advocates for social justice, representing marginalized voices, and contributing to community development through active participation in non-profit organizations and grassroots movements. They carry customs, traditions, languages, and social norms, thereby preserving national and cultural identities. Their involvement in the entrepreneurship, industry, agriculture, and service sectors promotes economic growth and innovation. Women's political and civic engagement improves governance and ensures that policies address the needs of all members of society, including women and children, thereby advancing democratic norms. It is their responsibility to ensure that policies reflect a diverse range of needs and perspectives by actively participating in elections, public debates, and referendums. Women have the right to hold leadership positions in government, contributing diverse perspectives and emphasizing equity and social progress. Women-led initiatives have historically had an impact on regulations governing domestic abuse, reproductive health, labor rights, and civil rights. Furthermore, they promote inclusive governance by advocating for the rights of underrepresented groups, such as minorities and people with disabilities. Women must be encouraged to take on these responsibilities if democratic societies and gender equality are to be preserved.

Mary Datchet from *Night and Day* represents the twenty-first-century woman mentioned in above written

lines and about whom Virginia Woolf predicted 100 years ago: “He seemed to see her marching ahead, a somewhat clumsy but powerful and independent figure, for whose courage he felt the greatest respect.”¹⁴ She can make decisions about her own life and support others. Ralph and William respect and trust her because

¹⁰ The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol - 4 (1977), p. 8.

¹¹ To the Lighthouse (2004), pp. 314-15.

¹² To the Lighthouse (2004), p. 47.

¹³ Ibid, 52-54.

¹⁴ Night and Day (1992), p. 187.

of her foresight, sensibility, and loyalty. For Mary, household chores are no less important than official work. She is grateful that her life has provided her with such moments of pure enjoyment, such as eating breakfast alone in a room with beautiful colors, and that she has a profession. Katherine admires her strength and independence. Mary Datchet works for the suffragist movement. She wonders why men always discuss politics, and speculates, “If we had votes, we should, too.”¹⁵ She understood that the right to vote could open up new avenues for women and put them on an equal footing with men, “a great day, not only for us, but for civilization.”¹⁶ She emphasizes the importance of women's access to education, specifically women who are not well educated. They don't see that small things matter, and that's where the leakage begins, and then we find ourselves in difficulties. Ralph suggests that Mary should read more in order to gain a better understanding and exposure to the outside world. He tells her that she lives with her inferiors and has the feminine tendency to obsess over details. She does not seem to understand when things matter and when they don't, which undermines female-led efforts and organizations. He claims that this is the primary cause of the failure of suffragist movements. But Mary loves to feel her mind in conflict with his and wants to be certain that he spares her female judgment no ounce of his male muscularity. She darns her stockings and reads Emerson, which Ralph considers a queer combination, but she enjoys both. Mary loves Ralph but quits midway for the sake of Katherine and Ralph both. She is brave enough to withstand the blow and remain intact, and she is only kept from doing so by a stubborn kind of respect for herself, which is at the heart of her nature and prohibits surrender. She understands that her life would be harsh and lonely almost beyond endurance. But, for her, love and marriage do not complete life. She is working on a much larger plan for the entire world, “something impersonal and serene in the spirit of the woman within, working out her plans far into the night—her plans for the good of a world.”¹⁷ Here is the new woman for whom Virginia Woolf was laying the groundwork. She is rational, brave, self-assured, and enjoys her work, “mistress of her own destiny.”¹⁸

In *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf described the word ‘feminist’ as offending and resentful to her, and she wants to burn and destroy it because it has become obsolete. She foresaw, “Men and women working together for the same cause.”¹⁹ She does not claim the right of women only, but it was something larger and deeper. It was for the men and women both, with due respect in their persons and to the great principle of Justice and Equality and Liberty. Virginia Woolf was talking about the universal benefit that needs men and women in their togetherness and not in their disparity and disproportion. Where universal benefit is concerned, what is the implication of the male-female struggle? She was voicing anti-modernist thoughts in this regard and was zealous towards the universal profit, to prevent war and preserve culture and intellectual liberty. She desired mutual respect and help and invited common aims between man and woman with the protection of their individuality. She asked for assurance of a kind of unity that can rub out the male-female divide, the capacity of the human spirit that can overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity. Virginia Woolf dreamt of universal peace and freedom for each and every one.

It is high time to recognize that Virginia Woolf not only wrote various types of histories but that the feminist movement of the 1970s as well as the work of feminist scholars such as Jane Marcus, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar were instrumental in establishing Virginia Woolf's feminist identity. However, it was a significant, critical, and much-needed shift, and while feminist criticism aided Virginia Woolf to gain recognition as a major modernist writer, she also helped to establish feminist criticism as a legitimate critical methodology. Readings of Virginia Woolf and her role as a woman writer appear to always include a discussion of her as a woman and a writer, with personal biography used to construct her position within literary history. Virginia Woolf created a method that is, “clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only who they are, but what life is.”²⁰

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