

A Room of One's Own at the End of the Century

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Abstract

In her essay “A Room of One’s Own”, written in 1929, Virginia Woolf wrote that if you give a woman “a room of her own, a five hundred a year and let her speak her mind,” in another hundred years she will become a poet. What has changed almost a hundred years later in female writing?

This paper examines the influence of Virginia Woolf on modern feminist theories considering problems of gender and women’s writing in general. Woolf asked some key questions about studying women’s literature. The points of view she expressed in her essay are compared to the ideas of more recent feminist criticism, especially those of Susan Stanford Friedman, who has tried to reconcile feminist reading of literature with modern theories of identity, advocating “a new geography of identity” which moves freely among the methods.

Key words: Virginia Woolf, essays, gender, feminist theory, women’s literature, Susan Stanford Friedman, geography of identity

Give her another hundred years, I concluded, reading the last chapter - people's noses and bare shoulders showed naked against a starry sky, for someone had twitched the curtain in the drawing-room - give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days. She will become a poet, I said, putting *Life Adventures* by Mary Carmichael at the end of the shelf, in another hundred years' time. (Woolf 621)

With these lines Virginia Woolf ends the fifth paragraph of her famous essay “A Room of One's Own”, one of the most inspiring and influential essays about women and literature in the twentieth century, an essay which proved to be a lot more than one of the modernist experiments. It was the first literary history of women writers and the first theory of literary inheritance based on gender. Woolf’s work influenced modern feminist theories considering problems of gender and women’s literature in general and can be regarded as a forerunner of a new approach in the theory of literature, as well as one of the first authors who recognized the gender problem. The essay had basically two receptions, one when it was first published eighty years ago, in 1929 and the second one about fifty years later, when it was rediscovered by feminist critics. At the time “A Room of One’s Own” was published, Woolf was an established author, a modern writer who tried to break the boundaries of Victorian literary traditions. At the beginning, her essay was generally well-received and the critics concentrated more on its style, beauty and inoffensive charm, than on the real issues of the essay (Rosenman 14-15). It was regarded more as a light entertainment rather than a deeply felt social and literary critique. Even authors who were directly criticised in her essay misinterpreted her text, such as Arnold Bennett, who called her “Queen of the High-Brows” and who focused on criticising Woolf’s grammar, ignoring its textual meaning (Bennett 258-260). Later, when critics explored her ideas, they were divided on their originality and validity. Those who did not see any disadvantage in being a woman, claimed that women had

reached equality with men and found Woolf's essay completely unnecessary and irrelevant. Others, who felt that women were still oppressed in society, praised her sociological insight in the issue, finding her both style and ideas rather radical, compared to her contemporaries.

As Woolf was famous for being a modern, experimental novel writer, her essay soon became of secondary interest, partly because the form of the essay was considered inferior to novel-writing, partly because of her later more important projects that followed, so "A Room of One's Own" was neglected for a period of time (Rosenman 18-19).

When feminist criticism emerged in the 1970s, *A Room of One's Own* came into focus again. The essay took on a new dimension; it started to function as a theory of women's literature. Woolf's essay is more literary and associative than theoretical and philosophical. Although her intention was not to offer extended readings of individual novels and poetry, her speculations about to what extent conditions in which women lived and wrote influenced their writing, became an issue of general interest for feminist critics. Social issues and gender problem were rediscovered again. Very soon, the essay proved controversial among modern feminists, as was the case with Woolf's contemporaries.¹ On the one hand, it was praised for its critique of the patriarchal society, political and literary resistance, female psychology, and the experience of oppression and victimization of women in general. The content itself and the narrative strategies of the essay offered a new way of thinking regarding the feminist approach to social issues and literature as well. On the other hand, there were complaints about the inhibiting rather than the inspiring influence of the essay. The critics like Elaine Showalter and Adrienne Rich claimed that "A Room of One's Own" acted against female self-expression, particularly against female anger. Showalter even named Woolf "the Angel in the House", who tried to escape through the idea of androgyny from her own personality, and for whom a room of her own was a prison, where she hid from society. In any case, the essay is definitely not a claim to a single truth. It often contradicts itself and continues to inspire discussions and controversy even today. The ideas of praising the feminine style on the one hand and advocating androgyny on the other, insisting on the gender problem and at the same time suggesting forgetting one's own sex proved to be rather controversial. All these ideas offer new perspectives and different points of view. Pointing to them, Woolf offered space for future feminist critics to explore and unravel.²

In her essay Woolf determines three kinds of conditions which are necessary for women to be successful writers. In the material sense, a woman has to have a room of her own and money to be independent to write. These two conditions are often impossible for women because of their sexual difference which causes their inferior social position. Asking her famous questions like "Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?" (Woolf 579), Woolf asks what effects poverty has on writing fiction and concludes that women are poor because they gave birth to children, and the law denied them the right to possess the money they earned or inherited. As intellectual

¹ For different receptions of her essay see Ellen Moers, "Epic Age – Part History of Literary Women" in *Literary Women*, p.13-14, Elaine Showalter, "Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny" in *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 263-297, Toril Moi, "Introduction: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist readings of Woolf" in: *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, p.1-8.

² Rosenman elaborates the idea of controversy between Woolf's belief in a disembodied, ahistorical, transcendent version of art and her awareness of importance of gender, body, tradition and society in the political engagement. She writes, "A Room of One's Own" should be regarded as a transitional work where Woolf begins to divest herself of the idea of transcendence in art towards political arguments. See "Difficulties and Contradictions: The Blind Spots of A Room of One's Own" in *A Room of One's Own. Women Writers and the Politics of Creativity*, p. 103-116.

freedom according to Woolf depends upon material things, and since poetry depends upon intellectual freedom, once she has her own space and is materially independent, a woman can dedicate her free time to writing fiction, even poetry. Respecting and stressing the tradition in female writing, Woolf advocates writing all kind of books: “books of travel and adventure, and research and scholarship, and history and biography, and criticism and philosophy and science” (Woolf 630). Women should not avoid any subject they show interest in, no matter how trivial or vast it is, they should be self-confident and never forget that books in a certain way influence each other. By writing books of different genres, women will, according to Woolf, profit the art of fiction, as well as help future generations of female writers to express themselves more freely.

In the psychological sense, a unity of male and female mind is important. Woolf first described a scene of a girl coming from one side of the street, meeting a young man at the corner. They got into taxi together and glide off down the street. This scene intrigues Woolf to think about the effort of two sexes being different from each other. She concludes that it interferes with the unity of the mind. Tracing the originally Coleridge’s idea of an androgynous mind, Woolf explains her vision of a mind which is incandescent, unimpeded and free from all the prejudices, grievance and anger. Our mind often changes its focus, bringing the world into different perspectives. Women sometimes experience splitting off of consciousness, which can be rather uncomfortable. Woolf tries to find a state of mind in which nothing should be held back. Through the scene of a man and a woman getting into the taxi together, the mind, which was divided in two, has come together in a natural fusion. Having absorbed all the male and female experience together, an androgynous mind is formed, a mind which has a harmonious balance between male and female elements.³ Woolf mentions Shakespeare as an example of an androgynous mind. An artist should avoid the notion of his/her sex, as the narrator in “A Room of One’s Own” says, “it is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman - manly or man – womanly” (Woolf 627).

In the formal sense, Woolf discusses which genre is most convenient for women, what modifications women have introduced in novel-writing, and emphasizes the need for women to write in their own way. Women should find their own expression which Woolf calls their “own sentence“, an expression which will be a female way of finding a mind of their own. Developing the idea that women think back through their mothers and stressing the importance of female tradition in writing, Woolf claims that the great writers have formed a sentence out of their own needs, a sentence which is unsuited to woman’s use. Women themselves should develop their own sentence which will articulate their way of experiencing life. Regarding the best genre for women, Woolf claims that at her time, it was still the novel, simply because all the other genres had already been set by men a long time before. The novel, as a new form, does not need as deep concentration as poetry, which is still a “denied outlet“. Woolf also compares book to body and claims that the book should be adapted to the

³ The idea of androgyny caused disputes among critics. Elaine Showalter argued that the idea of an androgynous mind was a way of Woolf’s own escaping from herself (see Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, the chapter “Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny“ and Toril Moi’s answer to her in the essay “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?“ in *SexualTextual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*). Nancy Topping Bazin wrote about the idea of androgyny, which is present in all Woolf’s novels, as well in the essay “A Room of One’s Own” in: *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* p. 5-8. Also in: Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, p. 153-156. The overview of the reception of the androgynous vision in Woolf’s work can be found in Karen Kaviola, “Revisiting Woolf’s Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation” where Kaviola compares androgynous ideas in “A Room of One’s Own” and *Orlando*, a phantasy-biography about an androgynous creature, p. 235-257.

body, so books written by women should be “shorter, more concentrated than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work” (Woolf 611).

With all the afore-mentioned fulfilled conditions, says Woolf, in a hundred years from her time, Mary Carmichael, an imaginary woman writer, will become a poet. Throughout history, women were trying to escape to anonymity by taking on male pseudonyms. Even in the nineteenth century women were hiding behind male pseudonyms (such as Currer Bell, George Sand or George Eliot) because of the fear of double standards. Woolf discusses two important ideas concerning writing fiction. All art, including Shakespeare as well, develops when current historical, social and material reality is satisfactory, regardless of whether this reality is being articulated through art or not. The other idea has an artistic connotation: real art should not reveal personal circumstances in the process of creation. To be able to achieve an incandescent mind, an artist must get free of all prejudices, anger, bitterness and grievance. This quality is not easy to acquire. It is a result of material and spiritual freedom. The fact that we do not know much about Shakespeare as a person, speaks in favour of his genius, claims Woolf. Women, on the contrary, did not have same opportunities to develop their gifts: Emily Brontë should have been a poet, and George Eliot a biographer or a historian. One exception was Jane Austen who, the same as Shakespeare, did not involve her private life into her writing, but managed to find her “own sentence” and wrote as a woman. Charlotte Brontë was not able to write without anger, fear and bitterness. Instead of her characters, she wrote about herself and her work of art is full of her personal wounds. Although the novel has a certain correspondence to real life, and its values are to some extent to real life, it is a fiction, a special reality in which the author must preserve his/her integrity and impartiality.⁴ This quality makes novels interesting to read, but this principle is difficult to achieve and most novels fail to have it, claims Woolf.

In what measure does sex influence acquiring artistic integrity? Virginia Woolf was one of the first, if not the first author who recognized the gender problem and exposed it in a story about Judith Shakespeare, an imaginary sister of William Shakespeare. Judith was as much as a genius as her brother and wanted to be a poet like him. As a woman, she was not allowed to develop her artistic gift, and the pressure put upon her brings her to a tragic end. She committed suicide after finding herself pregnant with the theatre manager who seduced her. At the same time, her brother made an impressive career. Judith was doomed by her sex to a life of pain, exploitation and death in the end. She was silenced to death.

“A Room of One’s Own” is sometimes considered to have a Utopian ending, setting the woman free from histories of repressions and limitations, which is impossible in real life. The essay goes playfully through different periods of literary history, creating an idea of modern freedom. Writing this essay Virginia Woolf created a chance to get free herself. The idea of a woman’s writing acted as a possibility for her to free herself from the pressure of the family, the doom of her fate, illness, the society itself (Lee 528). Her essay should encourage other women to free their mind, to be able to write openly and without hesitation about any subject they feel they have something to say. At the same time, the ambiguity of the essay inspires constant conversations dealing with power, oppression, freedom, art and politics, and the eternal theme, about women and men.

⁴ Woolf claims that a good writer has an integrity and explains it as “the conviction that he gives one that this is a truth” (Woolf 608).

The points of view which Woolf expressed in her essays can be compared to the ideas of more recent feminist criticism which separated from gender problem for a period of time. Recently there have been attempts to reconcile feminist reading of literature with modern theories of identity, leading to a “new geography of identity” which moves freely among the methods.

Gender continued to be in the focus of feminist literary study for a period of time, especially through two forms: gynocriticism and gynesis. Gynocriticism, as a special study of literature written by women, represents the historical study of women writers as a distinct literary tradition. The term was coined by Elaine Showalter to determine a special kind of feminist criticism, whose main characteristic is the analysis focused on a woman. The main category of this approach is gender as a set of social, psychological and cultural conditions under which women wrote and which affected their literature. Gender itself is not mentioned to be used as a means for studying literary texts written by men, but it tends to help to reconstruct women’s literature. It has neither positive, nor negative connotation, but indicates the imbalance between the sexes which influenced limited personal and professional experience by women, their inferior education and obstacles in developing their talents. Researching the differences in literature written by men and by women, the different treatments of literary elements and the reasons for these differences are brought to focus. There are no value judgements and the question of difference is not whose literature is more valuable, but what is specific for literature written by women (Dojčinović-Nešić 52-53). This type of criticism is meant to “develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adopt male models and theories” (Showalter 131). Nevertheless, gynocriticism is focused on women writers and privileges gender as the principle of selection.

Besides gynocriticism, Showalter identified gynesis as the second highly influential feminist critical practice in the 1980s. Gynesis, the term borrowed from Alice Jardine, puts women in the discourse, suggesting theoretical reading of the feminine as a discursive effect that disrupts the master narratives. It is more concerned with textual effects of gender, than with gender of a writer. In her book *Mappings - Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, Susan Stanford Friedman explains that these two approaches sometimes clashed and female writers sometimes excluded one term in favour of the other. With the spread of poststructuralism, they started functioning more together. Both gynocriticism and gynesis put stress on sexual difference and they privileged gender as a consistent of identity. According to gynocriticism, the existence of patriarchy itself functions as a justification that women in different times and places can be treated as a part of a common tradition based on gender. Gynesis implies the fact that language is dependent on gendered binaries through linguistic inscriptions of masculine/feminine (Friedman 18).

Susan Stanford Friedman argues that privileging gender across the subfields of academic feminism prevented further advances in theories of identity and subjectivity which can develop in many different fields (like feminism itself, multiculturalism, postcolonial studies, poststructuralism, cultural studies, sociology, geography, political theory etc.). Friedman wants to move “beyond gender” and beyond gynocriticism and gynesis. She wants to affirm the so called “locational feminism” which is an approach which moves freely among different methods. Her idea is to improve feminist criticism and cultural studies and to connect feminist literature study to theories of identity. Friedman emphasizes that moving beyond gender does not mean forgetting it, but returning to it in a new way and calls this new spatial rhetoric the “new geography of identity” (Friedman 18). The new geography of identity stresses the interaction of gender with other forms of power relations based on cultural categories such as race, class, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and age. This kind of

geography is dynamic and moves through socially constructed spaces. It reflects opposing movements in the world today, circling around the issue of identity. The term *identity* itself has a double meaning. It is constructed through difference from the other. For example, identification to one group (concerning same sex, race, and sexuality) depends from binary system “us” versus “them” and the main issue is on the difference of one group from the other. At the same time, *identity* bears the meaning of sameness (as in the word *identical*); it confirms a kind of commonality (Friedman 19). Pointing out that her wish is not to develop a full genealogy of the origin of the new geography of identity, Susan Stanford Friedman distinguishes six discourses of identity, which are at the same time related, as well as distinct. Over time, they showed that gynocriticism and gynesism could not offer answers to new political and social changes in the society. These discourses are not stages in development of feminist discourse, they appear simultaneously and often overlap, despite different historical and intellectual influences.

The first discourse puts stress on differences between women where identity is formed in terms of “multiple oppression” or “double jeopardy”. Oppression is the main constituent of identity, which leads to distinguishing various kinds of victimization on the basis of class, religion, race, nationality, sexuality etc. The discourse of oppression insists on the idea that the definition of identity only in terms of gender means reinscription of other forms of oppression by rendering them invisible.

The second discourse of positionality grew out of the previous one. The idea of identity as the site of multiple subject positions implies multiple self. Its location occupies many positions and this positionality fosters interactional analysis of identity as a product of mutually dependent systems of dissimilarity. The difference may or may not be bound to oppression. Stanford Friedman gives the example of identity of Virginia Woolf herself, which is formed at the crossroads of many different formulations of power and powerlessness. She was a white woman living in the British Empire, belonging to the upper-middle class, married, without children, but with strong lesbian desires. She was a writer, but also sexually abused in her childhood by her half-brother.

The third discourse goes beyond multiple subject positions toward contradictory subject positions. Contradiction is fundamental for the structure of subjectivity and the phenomenological experience of identity. In this sense a woman can be oppressed and privileged at the same time, oppressed by her gender and privileged by her class, race, nationality etc. On the other hand, a man can be privileged by his gender, but oppressed by the race, class or some other social category. This discourse shows that the general distribution of power into two categories of power and powerlessness is not valid, the contradictions that emerge emphasize the interaction of these two contradictory notions.

The fourth discourse refers to relationality, where one axis of identity is regarded in relation to other axes. For example, gender can be regarded in relation to class, race or sexuality. Identity is considered as a fluid site, which depends upon a point of reference and it moves together with this point, especially in relation to the structure of power. This discourse of relationality stresses the changeable nature of identity, which is formed according to different points of reference and material and historical circumstances. Gender, class, religion, ethnicity or religion function in mutual relation as sites of privilege and exclusion and at the same time they spin a web of changeable relations of power.

The fifth discourse of positionality is situational, which also treats identity as a fluid site rather than a stable and fixed essence. This fluidity changes from one location to another.

The geographical location is the central constituent of identity. Every situation happens in a certain location where different axes of power and powerlessness meet. The situation determines if one constituent of identity will prevail over the other: in one situation it will be gender of a person, in some other, his/her race, religion or ethnicity. Identity is a product of multiple subject positions, but the axes of identity are not always visible in each situation. This discourse focuses on different aspects of subjectivity and the way they move through different locations, taking different positions, from the background to the foreground and vice versa.

The sixth discourse is the discourse of hybridity, which was developed due to ethnic, postcolonial and diasporic studies. This hybridity is the product of geographical migrations and blending and clashing of different cultures. Emigration, exile or living in the borderlands affected the forming of identity as a heterogeneous mixture. It is never pure and appears as a product of cultural grafting, which is a result of geographic migrations. Stanford Friedman writes that sometimes, this discourse moves between a “language of diasporic loss of origin and a language of embrace for syncretic heterogeneity and cultural translation” (Friedman 24).

The new geography of identity itself is sometimes contradictory owing to blending and clashing of overlapping or parallel discourses of feminism, multiculturalism, poststructuralism and postcolonial studies which imply travel, nomadism, diaspora and cultural hybridity produced by movement. The new configurations of identity are formed, which move beyond achievements of gynocriticism and gynesis. Various constituents of both male and female writers should be considered together, because interactional, situational, relational and locational positions of writers and their heterogeneous identity go “beyond gender” and show that focusing on gender loses its cogency.

The new geography of identity shows also the inadequacies of fixed binaries of male/female or masculine/feminine due to the multiplex identity of writers. Susan Stanford Friedman compares the biographical profiles and writings of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence and Jean Rhys, trying to illuminate a web of positions based on gender, class, nationality, race and sexuality. What approach would gynocriticism and gynesis apply? Gynocriticism would first emphasize the difference between two male and two female writers and foster generalizations about male versus female modernism in British literature. Woolf and Rhys would be on one side and Joyce and Lawrence on the other. Gynesis would focus on the feminine in the text, and the effects it has on the text itself, putting women in the discourse. The new geography of identity will, on the contrary, lay stress upon a fluid matrix out of which multi-layered subjectivities emerge. This matrix seems invisible because of the discourses of gender difference. Opposite to Woolf and Rhys, because of gender issue, Joyce’s texts assert a kind of patriarchal privilege. Woolf was the Englishwoman, whereas Rhys grew up in Dominica as a colonial subject who wrote as an outcast from the edge of the homeland of imperial power. Joyce could be regarded as an Irish colonial subject and an outcast as well, writing from Paris and Zurich. Woolf and Lawrence, both born into the privileged heart of the British Empire, escaped of its privileged centre: Woolf by using gender as the basis for affirming home as the Society of Outsiders whereas Lawrence engaged himself in the form of masculinist primitivism. Concerning social position, Woolf belonged to the upper-middle-class in contrast to Rhys and Lawrence. Regarding sexuality, Joyce and Rhys wrote from their heterosexual position, whereas Woolf and Lawrence on the other hand exist in different places among the periphery of veiled bisexual, homoerotic and lesbian desire (Friedman 27-28). All these ranges of positions show the inadequacies of any binaries: male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, privileged/working class, colonial/colonized.

Moreover, they stress differences of writers' identities, because some of writers mentioned share common locations, but their positions differ. The relational characteristic of identity undermines the idea of male versus female modernism to which gynocriticism tends, as well as binaries masculine/feminine upon which gynesis depends. The writers, as well as their characters, move freely through space taking multiple and shift positions in relation to each other, as well as to different systems of power relations.

Gender cannot be regarded in isolation from other cultural narratives. The task of locational feminist criticism is often contradictory and implies focussing on sex difference and gender issue upon which gynocriticism and gynesis depend, but also takes into consideration the multi-layered matrices in which gender is only one among many axes of identity. Identity is not only based on sexual difference and gender, but has also relational, situational and interactive elements and emerges as the result of an ongoing process of becoming, without origin or end.

The forming of female literary history started from the point that literary history, as well as literature itself, is fiction. The writing of a new literary history, which was already demanded by Virginia Woolf in "A Room of One's Own" seemed to come to a dead end and separated from similar approaches. Susan Stanford Friedman offered a new approach to feminist criticism that goes beyond gynocriticism and gynesis. She fosters the "locational criticism", a kind of criticism that is relational and moves fluidly among different methods. In the context of cultural studies, feminist readings of literature should be connected to different theories of identity (Dojčinović-Nešić 36). The gender issue recognized by Virginia Woolf continues to be elaborated through the prism of the mobile terrains of the new millennium.

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