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Book Review: A Room of One's own

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INTRODUCTION

A Room of One's own is an extended essay by Virginia Woolf. Published in September 1929, this essay was based on two papers Woolf read in 1928 in two Cambridge student societies namely, Newnham Arts Society at Newnham College and the ODTAA Society at Girton College, respectively.¹ It is considered to be one of the best pieces of feminist literature and it conveys social injustices against women and their lack of free expression assertively. Woolf's strong opinions on how women have been deprived of growth opportunities and are kept from being given proper education and mediums of expression are supplemented by strong language and the use of imagery and metaphors. This formal exclusion of women from being able to access resources for free thoughts and expression has led to Woolf believing that women require "money" and "a room of their own" to be able to write fiction. These difficulties that women face while trying to write fiction are directly linked to poverty as well as politics. Through this book, we understand the importance of intellectual freedom and the disparity between the freedom of expression offered to women and men. Laws play a very important role in shaping our society and even they have not been in support of women freely

¹ Virginia Wolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Prabhat Prakashan 1967)

being able to express themselves and have the means to do so. This is justified through various examples in the book and helps us realize the struggle it has taken for women to gain credibility and standing when it comes to writing fiction.

SUMMARY

A room of one's own has a partly fictionalized narrative in the form of an essay. It starts with Woolf being invited for a lecture. She talks about her primary stance which says that women require money and a room of their own in order to write fiction.² This argument is put forth by Woolf in order to emphasize the additional struggle and resources required by women in order to be able to write. She goes ahead with her thesis by introducing a fictional female character and asks the reader to call her "Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance". This fictional character is facing the same obstacles as Woolf is. She then proceeds to talk about Oxbridge college and the discriminatory and unreasonable restrictions imposed on women there. The stark difference between the educational experiences of men and women is portrayed through this part of the novel. She gives the example of how men's colleges were funded by wealthy men and kings, unlike women's colleges which had to struggle to raise funds. She also reflects on the role of wealth and power in the prosperity of women in the field of literature. To do further research on this, Woolf goes to the British Museum in London wherein she encounters various books on women written by men. She gets infuriated over the way women have been described by men and how they are portrayed as the "inferior" species. She further goes on to say that men strongly believe in having a patriarchal society and portray women as inferior in order to enhance their own sense of superiority. Woolf is grateful for the inheritance left to her by her aunt. She talks about how good living conditions and the creative freedom of women are directly linked. After explaining this, she paints the life of Judith Shakespeare who is the imaginary sister of William Shakespeare and is equally talented. The sharp contrast between the lives of William Shakespeare and his sister with reference to the freedom and opportunities

² *Ibid*

that they have access to shows how deeply dysfunctional our patriarchal societal norms are and how much of the literary talent of women has gone to waste.

After giving the readers this tragic example, she moves on to applaud all those women who have despite the discriminatory setup of the society, managed to give us extraordinary pieces of literature. An analysis of the current state of literature is done and that shows Woolf that women often have to mold their writing styles to fit into the current expectations of society. She implores and encourages women to take up writing and emphasizes how important it is for women to portray their own sex. The essay is concluded by Woolf saying that if Judith Shakespeare is alive within all women and if they are given access to money and privacy, she will be reborn.

REVIEW

“A Room of One’s Own” is an excellent piece of highly opinionated essay which portrays the reality of women in the field of literature. Themes such as the importance of wealth, institutionalized sexism, male aggression, and subjectivity of truth are explored in this book. It primarily accentuates the importance of intellectual freedom and highlights the status quo of women during the time it was written. During the late 18th and early 19th century, writing, and especially the writing of fiction for money, was considered to be an “unladylike activity”. Derogatory terms such as ‘female quill-driver’ were common. Women from well-to-do backgrounds were not expected to pursue a career at all but rather to devote their efforts to make a good marriage. ³Even up to this day, we see these stereotyped gender roles being ingrained in the mindsets of the general public. Woolf’s arguments state that women cannot write fiction or break these chains of oppression without having “a room” of their own and money. Along with accentuating the dark side of females in the literature industry, this book also instills hope by talking about how each new generation of women writers further adds upon the success of their previous generations, and for that to be possible the lives of those

³ Greg Buzwell, ‘Women writers, anonymity and pseudonyms’ (*British Library*, 23 October 2020) <<https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/women-authors-and-anonymity>> accessed 15 February 2022

women need to be known and their books read, studied, and valued.⁴ It applauds the women who have gone against all odds and written fiction. It implores the readers to understand the undeniable role of women in the literature industry. This book remains highly relevant as even today, there is an alarming difference between the freedom of expression offered to women and men. Even today, gender censorship is a pervasive issue and gender equality with reference to freedom of expression remains to be a far-fetched goal.⁵ According to Irene Khan, "Women's voices are suppressed, controlled or punished explicitly by laws, policies and discriminatory practices, and implicitly by social attitudes, cultural norms, and patriarchal values"⁶ and hence, it is imperative that we read feminist literature to truly understand this deep-rooted issue as well as to support women writing literature.

CONCLUSION

Also known as one of the best "feminist critiques", *A Room of One's Own* is a classic piece of feminist literature. Through this book, the reader is enlightened about the importance of having female narratives as well as the way to reach such equality. Despite being written back in 1929, this book has a very forward and direct approach towards gender equality and the rights of women. It has acted as a catalyst for social change and has definitely encouraged women to take up writing. Today, reading *A Room of One's Own* truly helps us understand the struggle that women have gone through to reach this stage and the further efforts and radical reconstruction of our society that is required to reach equality. I would like to conclude my review with a quote from this book – "Literature is no one's private ground; literature is common ground." – Virginia Woolf⁷

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ 'Gender equality in freedom of expression remains a distant goal -UN expert' (*United Nations Human Rights*) <<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27668&LangID=E>> accessed 15 February 2022

⁶ Greg Buzwell (n 3)

⁷ Virginia Woolf (n 1)