

## "Material Autonomy and spiritual Equality: A Comparative Study of Feminist Thought in A Room of One's Own and Woman in the Nineteenth Century"

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الاستقلال المادي والمساواة الروحية: دراسة مقارنة للفكر النسوي في " غرفة تخص المرء وحده " والمراة في القرن التاسع عشر "

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### Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of feminist thought in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) by Margaret Fuller. Both authors critique patriarchal structures and advocate women's emancipation, yet they differ in their approaches. Woolf emphasizes economic independence and personal space as essential conditions for female creativity, while Fuller highlights spiritual growth, intellectual development, and equality within social and religious frameworks. The study argues that, despite these differences, both texts contribute significantly to early feminist discourse and remain relevant to contemporary discussions on gender equality.

Keywords: Financial independence - Spiritual equality - Feminist thought - Women - 19th century.

### الملخص

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً مقارناً للفكر النسوي في كتاب *غرفة تخص المرء وحده* (1929) للكاتبة فرجينيا وولف وكتاب *المراة في القرن التاسع عشر* (1845) للكاتبة مارغريت فولر ينتقد كلا العملين البنى الأبوية ويدعوان الى تحرر المراة. أولاً انهما يختلفان في منهج الطرح. حيث تؤكد وولف على أهمية الاستقلال الاقتصادي وامتلاك مساحة خاصة كشرط أساسي للأبداع النسوي، في حين تركز فولر على النمو الروحي والتطور الفكري وتحقيق المساواة ضمن الأطر الاجتماعية والدينية. وتخلص الدراسة الى انه رغم هذه الاختلافات، فإن العملين يقدمان اسهاماً مهماً في الخطاب النسوي المبكر، ولا يزالان يحتفظان بأهميتهما في النقاشات المعاصرة حول المساواة بين الجنسين. الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستقلال المادي - المساواة الروحية - الفكر النسوي - المراة - القرن التاسع عشر.

Literature provides the best scope to delve deeper into the inner dynamics of the society and human relationships. No doubt, literary works can also function as apt social documents that portray the social occurrences with a mesh of quintessential artistic touch. Such works have the affective appeal of reaching out to the masses, and thereby gain a position of relevance in the history of world literature. For instance, one can take the examples of authors like Virginia Woolf and Margaret Fuller who exude their very best as literary artists in their respective works, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *A Woman in the 19th Century* (1845). These works of literature have attained the place of immortality in the history of literature, and have been catapulted to the position of immense popularity and literary relevance owing to the subject matters portrayed in the course of the literary narratives. It has to be taken into reckoning that these two contextual works have certain common themes that get resonated to the audience, thereby pointing toward a social reality of the time the works were penned in. However, one should not also miss out on the distinctions between these works that set them apart from each other.

If one delves into the writing by Virginia Woolf, it is not hard to comprehend that the author wishes to highlight the innate disparity between males and females of the human society with utmost vehemence. Woolf goes on to explore the history systematic violence meted out to the women folk of the society by the patriarchal ideology with all its machinery for oppression and mental conditioning. Woolf argues that a female needs to have both money and shelter of her own so that she is able to write fiction. This partly fictionalized narrative goes on to dramatize the psyche of the imaginary narrator. Woolf makes it clear that one can call her by any name as the name itself stands no importance. As such, it becomes quite clear that the literary artist wants the narrator to be taken as an archetypal character that represents the entire female community of the human society. One finds Woolf delving in the investigation of the disparity between the sexes with the narrator exploring the various educational experiences that were available to males and females at Oxbridge College, while also highlighting other materialistic distinctions in their lives. After this, the narrator goes on to spend an entire day at the British Library endeavoring to know more about the scholarship of females (Fernald 167). However, to her astonishment, all of the available literature had been penned by males, and these writings simmered with anger.

At this juncture of the narrative, Woolf channelizes the narration toward historical data. The narrator goes on to find very less information about the everyday life of females in comparison to the documentation of males and their activities. As such, the narrator takes the decision to reconstruct the existence of females with her own imagination. Thus, one can understand quite well that Virginia Woolf tries to bring out the grave picture of gender inequality and disparity between the two sexes of the human society. She cites historical data and literary authorship as valid proof of her persuasive argument. The writing oozes with the voice of feminism as Woolf tries her very best to make the audience or readers comprehend the importance of treading toward a path of equality. The author identifies money and home as primary factors that can hold key importance in ensuring the wellbeing and emancipation of the females of the society. The fictional narrator becomes the voice of reason that makes other feel the utmost need for challenging the status quo of things that would only lead to more oppression and subordination of the females.

The narrator generates the figure called Judith Shakespeare only to highlight the tragedy of fate of this highly intellectual female who would have faced many impediments owing to the parameters and patriarchal ideology of the society. It needs to be noted that Judith Shakespeare is simply the archetypal character that represents the woes and challenges faced by the females for centuries of systematic violence and oppression by their male counterparts of the human society. Woolf also discusses about the achievements of the female novelists belonging to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She discusses about the primary importance of tradition to any aspiring author. Thus, the literary artist is too keen to bring out the real picture of gender discrimination that has affected the human world for so long. Being a feminist, she wants the society to attain a state of gender equality so that the females are able to enjoy equal status, respect, and power in comparison to the males. Being a literary artist herself, Woolf highlights how literature can be a major form of female emancipation indeed. She substantiates her argument with proper proof from historical data about literature as well. No doubt, this essay aims to incite the audience or the readers to bring in the needed changes for treading toward the path of personal development and freedom from the shackles of the society. Woolf wants females to subvert the dominant narrative of the patriarchic society to make way for their own rights and privileges. She makes it clear that the tradition has hardly been bequeathed to the females, and hence the females should have paramount vehemence in establishing their rights and position in the society. Woolf calls for action so that the future generation of females can be made better by the initiative taken by the females of the society.

Now, it needs to be reckoned that money is a key factor as a woman cannot have a shelter of her own if she does not have money. As such, it is one of the primary requirements for the females to have money of their own as a means of establishing their freedom and position in the society. Woolf discusses how the creativity of women has been stifled in a systematic manner all through the ages, since they do not have enough power to stand up against the institutionalized practices of patriarchy. According to the literary artist's opinion, intellectual freedom is dependent upon materialistic things. She identifies that the females have been living in a state of economic dependence and poverty for ages. Since poetry is dependent on intellectual emancipation, very few females have penned successful poetry. Thus, the author weaves the narrative together by linking monetary possessions, creativity of females, and creative expression. Since writing novels can be executed with frequent interruptions, females are more prone to penning such literary work than poetry. The frequent interruptions are brought about due to the fact that females hardly have a room of their own where they can write without any impediments (Restuccia 258). As such, the essay is a call for economic emancipation of females which would accelerate the process of attainment of gender equality in the society.

Woolf highlights the fact that females are taken to be lesser humans than the males in the society. Hence, females have not been able to produce impressive works of art which are at par with the ones created by men. The imaginary character of Judith Shakespeare whom Woolf portrays as the twin sibling of William Shakespeare works as a perfect example of how the society discriminates against the females. The systematic violence meted out to the women gets exposed as Judith is shown to be equally talented as William, while being deemphasized and underestimated by her own family as well as the society. Woolf shows how Judith writes secretly and feels ashamed about it as well. When she opposes getting married at a tender age, she is beaten by her father, after which she commits suicide. As such, Virginia Woolf goes on to show how a woman as talented as William Shakespeare could have never attained the position of success and recognition in the society owing to the institutionalized practices of male chauvinism and gender disparity. Judith's demise exposes how innumerable female voices have been silenced in the course of history due to the surmounting effect of patriarchy.

The central idea behind *A Room of One's Own* is that every female requires a room that belongs to her. Such a private area would provide the female with the space and time to take part in writing evoking all her creative senses. Also, she would not be interrupted by others while she is busy writing poetry or engaging in any sort of creative pursuit. It needs to be remembered that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century hardly any female would get the opportunity to enjoy the space and time that was considered to be luxury for them. These luxuries remained quite elusive for the women folk of the society, and art went on to suffer a lot due to this reason. However, it cannot be forgotten that the room is very much relevant as a symbolic representation as well. The room symbolizes greater issues like leisure time, privacy, and economic independence (Wall 203). Virginia Woolf saw these things as integral components that could work a lot to bridge the gap between the position of males and females in the society. As such, it can be noted that the author correctly identifies the reasons behind the subordination of females.

While the author explores the preconditions of pursuing art, it can be said that the preconditions are quite basic for uplifting the social position of women. Woolf knew that economic independence would bring about a sea of change in the lives and perspectives of the females. Owing a property of their own could also be seen as a vehement subversion of the patriarchal practices that aimed at subjugating the women folk by constraining them to the roles of domesticity and motherhood. The essay also predicts that until the time the institutionalized inequalities between men and women are not addressed, females would remain in the position of second-class citizens in the society, while their achievements in the field of literature too

would be branded as less worthy in comparison to the literary endeavors of the males. Thus, this feminist essay provides a scathing attack on the patriarchal practices, and suggests ways of overcoming the problems of gender disparity.

On the other hand, one can take into consideration the literary work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), written by the famous American journalist and women's rights activist, Margaret Fuller. The writing by Fuller delves deep into the dynamics of the American society. The author opines that men are burdened with certain selfish desires, and this impedes their path to reach a state of perfection. While she goes on to acknowledge the existent disparity between males and females of the American society, she is hopeful of a positive change that would neutralize the inequality between the two sexes. Thus, it can be said that the perspective of Fuller is quite a positive one indeed, while she also does not refrain from exploring the inner dynamics that influence the gender relations in the society. What makes this literary work quite important is the fact that the writing works as a perfect social document that represents the American society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the perspective of a female. While a major part of the social narrative can be termed to be biased due to their male authors, Fuller can be taken to have a better view and understanding of things that affected the lives of women in America during that time in history (Ferguson 12).

The author starts off by examining the males and females in the country of America, and observes that many individuals of the society have the belief that males are the heads of the households in a marital relationship. On the other hand, the women are taken to be emotional in nature. Fuller goes on to identify the fact that women are taken to be inferior to men. Women and children are seen to be akin to one another, while men are viewed as strong and dependable. As such, the effect of patriarchal ideology in the American society of that time becomes evident through the documentation of the author. One can draw a parallel with the writing of Woolf who also identifies how women are subordinated in the society owing to the impact of patriarchy. Moreover, since the two authors belong to two different nations and societies, the universal impact of patriarchy on the lives of people can be comprehended. Fuller continues by opining that females require expansion so that he can seek to be like their male counterparts in the society. The author highlights the primary importance of self-dependence for the women folk of the American society. However, the analysis of the social issues and the proposed remedies has universal applicability indeed.

Fuller engages in highlighting the idea that a state of equality between the two sexes would ascertain divinity to newer heights as it would be instrumental in fulfilling the lives of males and females. The author delves into historical evidence which shows that males and females are equally divine in nature. She also takes cue from the religion of Christianity discussing about the male as well as female saints. The author also opines that women do not require power or poetry to attain happiness. Rather, she puts stress on the importance of religious and intellectual emancipation of females so as to attain a state of equality with men. Thus, one can very well understand that Fuller differs entirely from the perspective of Virginia Woolf in this regard. Woolf never discusses about religion in her essay. However, Fuller pays much importance to religious freedom. It can be said that the Woolf never considers religion as an integral part of female identity or as a way to attain emancipation from the impositions and ideological parameters of patriarchy.

While Woolf pays utmost importance to the possibility of creative pursuits by women, Fuller does not ascribe importance to poetry. For Woolf, writing poetry is a vehement form of expressing empowerment. Woolf highlights the need for economic independence so that females can get a room for their own sake. On the other hand, Fuller is more interested in delving into the social institution of marriage. In the previous essay discussed, one would not find reference to any importance given to marriage as a social institution. However, Fuller discusses how there are four types of marital bonds. The author of the literary work ranks these

types of marriages in ascending order. Fuller discusses how the first kind of marriage that is the household partnership between the male and the female is built upon mutual dependence and convenience. She describes how man is the breadwinner, while the female takes care of the household. The second kind of marriage is termed as mutual idolatry. Here, the male and the female find perfect solace and happiness in the other, leaving the entire world aside. Next is intellectual companionship between two people. Here, the male and the female are companions, and their relationship is characterized by mutual trust. However, the amount of love in such a relationship is lesser than the other kinds. Fuller opines that the highest form of marital bond is the union of religion. In this kind of a bond, the male and the female consider each other equals who have embarked upon a religious journey toward a common goal. The author also mentions about the life of the old maids who were unmarried, but were in close communion with divinity—something that married people could never achieve.

Now, it becomes quite evident that Fuller is too much inclined toward delving into the positive impact of religion on the lives of women. She projects religion as a force of empowerment of females. However, she does not delve into the various patriarchal practices that are associated with religion. Her denial of acknowledging the importance of power and poetry in the process of women empowerment also works as a shortcoming as she does not explore the possibility of how poetry and power can add to the social standard of females. She fails to see the lack of equality in the domains of arts and power as strong markers of patriarchal influence on the lives of females. She also does not consider the case of other religions that have certain practices that only advance the cause of male dominance in the society. So, Woolf's writing comes across to be much more convincing in spite of the fiber of imagination that has been incorporated by the author. While one finds the exploration of the types of marriages in Fuller's writing, Woolf delves deeper into the issue of gender disparity through the portrayal of familial discouragement in the case of Judith Shakespeare who is as talented as her male sibling. As such, Judith becomes the archetypal figure who makes the audience relate to the issue much more intimately.

Fuller also looks at the distinction between males and females for the purpose of enforcing the idea that females need to strengthen their spiritual and intellectual resources. She opines that both males and females have same souls, even with the distinctions in masculinity and femininity. In her opinion, there is no difference between males and females. She says that there is no fully masculine male and no fully feminine female. Thus, Fuller endeavors to delve deeper into the notion of gender identity and sexual identity. The author is correct in identifying the fact that before a proper union between the two sexes can be achieved, every man and woman should establish an individual identity while working as a self-dependent person (Kolodny 143). She says that men require removing their domination on the females for the purpose, while the females too need to come forward and claim their emancipation from the dominating influence of the male, working as self-dependent individuals. She calls for action among the female folk of the society to stand up for themselves, and pave the way for a better future where such gender disparity would not be existent.

Surely, both the writings by Woolf and Fuller delve into the same avenue as they explore the social dynamics that come into play while ascertaining the identity and social position of females. While these works cannot be termed hardcore historical documents, they surely have immense relevance as social commentaries highlighting the condition of females in the contemporary society. No doubt, the approach of the two authors is different from each other. While one discusses about economic emancipation and poetry as primary ways of finding equal status, the other urges upon the females to seek the path of religion. Both are writers who are feminists who use their skills of argumentation and persuasion to evoke the audience or readers for taking the needed action against the hegemonic and chauvinistic influence of the male folks of the society. The ways suggested by the two authors in context might very well be different

from one another, but both aim to bring female emancipation from the state of subordination. As such, both the writings are very much important as feminist texts that delve very deep to identify various causes and effects of patriarchal practices. The writings can be seen as the markers of awakening of senses among the female folks about the institutionalized form of oppression that has been meted out to them for ages.

While Fuller gives a picture of the society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America, Woolf's discussion throws light on the social position of females in the 20<sup>th</sup> century England. Moreover, both the literary works can be described to have universal appeal and relevance indeed as the problem of patriarchal practices impacted the lives of females from all the corners of the world. As such, the writings have remained relevant even in the present times for understanding the ways in which female empowerment can be achieved in the long run. Apart from this, the importance of earning a livelihood and nature of marital bond leading to sense of individual identity and female empowerment are also described with utmost clarity in the two writings. What sets these two writings apart from many other literary works is the fact that the authors dared to point toward the systematic violence that was being meted out to the female folks of the society by the various social practices and institutions.

One can imagine how patriarchy would have been at its peak during the times when these two literary works were published. There were no feminist movements or female right activist groups during that time in history. Rather, many women were not even aware of the various ways in which they were being subordinated by the males. They failed to identify many social practices that were aimed at establishing male dominance. At this juncture in history, these writers came up with their seminal works that constructed the founding stones of feminist movements of the future. The authors are highly successful in zeroing in on the fact that women were being subordinated in specific ways that they needed to identify. Also, both the authors are of the same view about the institutionalized nature of gender roles and gender construction by the social forces. Fuller and Woolf can surely be attributed with the credit of being immensely critical of the status quo of the society governed by patriarchal ideology. Apart from this, the two authors exude their very best in persuasiveness and analytical skills in zeroing in on the causes of gender disparity that affected the lives of innumerable women during that time in history. Intriguingly, their analysis still remains relevant even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and so the texts too have remained highly important as well.

Nonetheless, the solution to the status quo of gender disparity as provided by Fuller and Woolf differ to enormous extent. If one thinks closely, it can be said that Virginia Woolf is much more progressive and subversive in her perspective in comparison to Fuller. While Fuller resorts to religion as a way of gaining gender parity in the society, Woolf discusses about the primary importance of material possession in the form of a room. The room is symbolic of property that ought to be owned by a female, and it is only possible if she is able to earn on her own. Economic independence of females would bring a major change in the power dynamics between males and females of the society. Traditionally, the males have enjoyed the position of breadwinners, while the females have depended on the males of the family for earning the livelihood while they spend time with the household chores. Woolf's suggestion of having economic independence for women subverts the institutionalized gender roles that have been popularized over the course of history. Also, Woolf's writing can be described as more relevant of the two in the modern day context. While feminist movements and groups have not paid much importance to religious union as a way of female empowerment, economic independence has come up as the primary ammunition in the arsenal of feminism to pave the way for a society that is characterized by gender equality. Aesthetic freedom and materialistic possessions can also be deemed to be extremely important in the path of achieving gender equality in the present day scenario. Woolf's rationale comes across to be more advanced in comparison to Fuller who goes on to resort to religious examples to establish her argument. Moreover, the

institution of marriage as highlighted by Fuller has not remained equally relevant in the present-day scenario.

Conclusion:

Hence, it would be apt to conclude by saying that both the contextual literary works succeed in highlighting the innate gender disparity that affected the social fiber of the human society during the 19th and the 20th century. While Woolf talks about the condition of women in context of the English society, Fuller explores the gender relations and social dynamics of the American population. The universality of patriarchy and its influence on the lives of women folk are the central thematic contents of both the writings. Both the writings can be taken as valid societal documents that depict the reality of gender relations. However, Woolf takes a more imaginative approach by introducing a fictional narrator. The author uses the fictional character of Judith Shakespeare to bring out the true picture of gender disparity. On the other hand, Fuller does not resort to the use of any imaginativeness in portraying the facts. Also, she differs from Woolf in her notion of religious freedom and importance of poetry with regard to female emancipation from the surmounting influence of patriarchal ideology. Nonetheless, both the literary works stand out owing to their depth of analysis and approach. The works have been immortalized over the years in the pages of literary history. The social documentation is invaluable in ascertaining the position of females in the human society in the past few centuries.

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