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## Male Representations in Woolf's A Room of One's Own

### Woolf'un Odasında Erkek Temsili

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#### Abstract

A Room of One's Own can be categorized as a 'feminist manifesto' because it discusses the role of women in the history of literature. Woolf argues that women are oppressed and explains why women are prevented from writing fiction. Further, A Room of One's Own raises many critical issues that are still significant for women of our contemporary world and hence suggests some of the materialist reasons for the oppression of women from Antigone to the present. To Woolf, educating women is the major momentum in their liberation because that is the only way for them to be treated 'equally'. Through female representations in the book, Woolf presents the conditions of men and the mindset of the society. This qualitative study aimed to determine male representations as perceived by undergraduate English Language and Literature students. Male chauvinism, male domination and male freedom were found to be the dominant themes.

**Keywords:** *Undergraduate students, English language and literature, gender inequality, tertiary education, English as a foreign language*

#### Öz

*Kendine Ait Bir Oda*, bir 'feminist manifesto' olarak kategorize edilebilir çünkü edebiyat tarihinde kadınların rolünü tartışmaktadır. Woolf, kadınların ezildiğini ve kadınların eğitimden mahrum bırakıldıkları için roman yazmalarının engellendiğini açıklamaktadır. Dahası, *Kendine Ait Bir Oda*, çağdaş toplumumuzun kadınları için hala önemli olan birçok kritik meseleyi gündeme getirmektedir ve dolayısıyla Antigone'dan günümüze kadınların ezilmesinin materyalist nedenlerini öne sürmektedir. Woolf'a göre, kadınları eğitmek, kurtuluşlarındaki ana momentumdur çünkü bu, onlara 'eşit olarak' davranmaya başlamanın tek yoludur. Kitabın

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kadın temsilleri aracılığıyla, Woolf erkeklerin yaşam koşullarını ve toplumun zihniyetini de ortaya koymaktadır. Woolf kitabında doğrudan erkekleri suçlamamakla birlikte kadınları ve kadınların toplumdaki yerini anlatarak erkeklerin toplumdaki yerine ve yaşam koşullarına da ışık tutmaktadır. Erkeklerin kadınlardan üstün tutulduğu İngiliz toplumunda kadınların yaratıcılığı engellenmekte ve dolayısıyla edebiyat dünyasında kadın yazarlardan söz etmek mümkün olmamaktadır. Woolf kitabında cinsiyet eşitsizliğine değinmekte ve bunun nedeni olarak da erkekleri değil, toplumu, toplumun kültürünü ve eğitimdeki eşitsizliği sorumlu tutmaktadır. Doğrudan erkeklerin anlatılmadığı *Kendine Ait Bir Oda*'da erkek temsillerini belirlemek ve İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrencilerin *Kendine Ait Bir Oda*'daki erkek temsillerine yönelik algılarını belirlemek bunun için önem arz etmektedir. Bu nitel çalışma, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı bölümünde okuyan on bir lisans öğrencisinin katılımıyla gerçekleşmiştir ve öğrencilerin *Kendine Ait Bir Oda*'da erkek temsillerini nasıl algıladıklarını belirlemeyi amaçlamıştır. Veri toplama aracı olarak yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılmış ve verilerin analizinde tematik analiz kullanılmıştır. Araştırmada erkek şovenizmi, erkek egemenliği ve erkek özgürlüğü temalar olarak bulunmuştur.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** *Lisans öğrencileri, İngiliz dili ve edebiyatı, Cinsiyet eşitsizliği, yüksek eğitim, yabancı dil olarak İngilizce*

## **Introduction**

Materialism is a world-view with many different meanings. At a very basic level it means the material or natural world of objects as opposed to the spiritual or supernatural world. At a more philosophical level we can speak of materialism as a discourse that deals with the physical world of objects. Economic materialism from a Marxist perspective traces the roots of art, religion, politics and philosophy in basic human needs such as food, shelter and clothing. In relation to women materialism can be seen as a critical discourse that shows how the labors of women go into maintaining the social order. Materialist feminism goes into the roots of unpaid labor such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children that forms a huge sector of the economy that is ignored by male writers, artists, intellectuals and scholars.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* argues how the worlds of women and poverty coincide; the absence of capital or resources to be independent renders women as dependents on men because historically women were the victims of material circumstances; that is, since the beginning of history women have been in the service of the household that included men and children and other domestic duties which means that "in general men have been hunters and fighters, while women have brought up the children" (Stassinopoulos, 1973, p. 37). In turn, this made women inferior because history came into the possession of men with the arrival of patriarchy and women had no other choice of independent livelihood and thinking in the absence of material support that included a room and money. Secondly, as

Marxism argues a human being's life is greatly determined by external factors—society, family, upbringing and heredity. But in the case of Virginia Woolf, the primary factors are money and a room. That is why Virginia Woolf argues that *if* women want to write a work of fiction—a metaphor for any piece of literature—they need money and a room of their own. In other words, the main thesis of her argument is that women's life is materially conditioned.

In the argument of Virginia Woolf however, women have always been deprived of their material conditions: money, a room and free time and in order to live a creative life where women can express themselves and therefore to reduce the inequalities between men and women, women should possess a room of their own and their own money. That is why the existence of material means is necessary for women to write a work of fiction. The material means here are a room and money and if women want to find their own identity and intellectual freedom, they must be in a position to obtain these two fundamental requirements. The room is a metaphor of space and money a metaphor of resources as much as possessions. “Intellectual freedom” or freedom of the mind needs that one does not have to depend on others in order to express one's thoughts. Dependence is the opposite of freedom. One cannot be intellectually free and a dependent at the same time. Space and resources are absolutely essential for women as social beings to discover themselves (Woolf, 1928, 92).

Marx and Engels argued that “social life is essentially practical” (Tucker, 1978, p. 144) and Bowlby (1993, p. 175) suggests that “great works of literature are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly *material things*, like health and money and the houses we live in”. In the idealized world of men, women have no ethical importance except as figments of the male imagination. On the contrary, Woolf argues that woman is “imaginatively ... of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history” (Woolf, 1992, p.56). In practice, she has no existence at all because men dismissed the importance of women since they were only seen as being wives, mothers, sisters or daughters—everything is relation to the man and not as independent beings. This is very significant for Woolf because existence, freedom, equality and the independence of women did not exist in the books that were written by men, nor did it exist in history. That is why she attempts to rewrite the history of the female gender. At the same time, Woolf contends that history was written by men and hence was dominated by men.

Most of the feminist critics argue that the main cause for constructing genders is the society itself (Yazdani & Cheraghi, 2014). Gender roles are culture bound and are shaped differently by the society (Letherby et al., 2014). Woolf explicitly identifies material security to women writers in *A Room of One's Own* as an important condition for “deliberative democracy” between males and females (Stein, 2009). Although women were accorded little value from an economic perspective, they were always seen as objects of desire and a piece of property that could be bought and sold in the market. The idea of selling one's wife and one's daughter is a gruesome experience, but one that is profitable. The crucial aspect that Showalter brings to light is very interesting because the novel shows how women were treated as a cultural stereotype at that time in England. If one's body is reduced to an object, that body becomes worthless and inferior to that of men since Aristotle argued that “female is an infertile, deformed male” (Brennan, 2003, p. 35) Similarly, the selling of the “wife” and “daughter” business can also mean how women have no intellectual or moral value, and are insignificantly deemed as expendable creatures. It is important to preserve and protect the body of women if they want to preserve their moral value.

As it can be seen, “life involves” before anything else eating, drinking and materially existing. That material part of our lives is always present and shapes people's character, intellect and various other values. That is why women need a room and money. A room is symbolic of feminine space where a woman can be herself without hindrance of masculine domination. A room also stands for the womb—which in essence is the private space of a woman that is beyond the male capacity to understand what it means to be a woman. In that sense the room becomes a space of the imagination or a place where a woman can give birth to ideas in the company of other women. A room thus is not only the certain solution for women to write fiction and expand their thoughts, but one of the best alternatives to resolve the problem of women's inferiority.

Woolf uses the space of a room in another sense. That is, she wants to eradicate the traditional stereotypes that are imposed on women—which are, primarily, looking after domestic duties, looking after children and servicing men and essentially being a passive woman: “woman's early life is a preparation for becoming, and her later life is devoted to being a successful wife and mother” (Blau, Ferber & Winkler, 2001, p. 14) She is using this space for creativity, for women to reinvent themselves as creatures that can think and produce. The room is closed and silent, detached from social norms (which are patriarchal) and manifests itself to be one of the most powerful ways to attack and criticize the history of “men's opposition to women's emancipation” (Woolf, 1992, p.72). However, pushing women

away from social practices could also go against women's need to fight for equality in public spaces. In other words, while they should possess their own private space women also need to find work and enroll in public affairs. "Her repetitive reproductive cycle is to be rendered rational by the work of (male) self-consciousness, in which historical agency is located" (Coole, 1993, p. 144) The room is both a metaphorical space for creativity and indispensable material space for the achievement of the occupation of writer. On the other hand, although "a room" is necessary, it is not sufficient; one must also have capital to run the business. The "money" part of the problem comes from the fact that although women worked, they did not earn money in history because they were not allowed to keep it. Further, speaking practically, if they were out working in real life, they would have had the chance to have a room of their own and money to keep their intellect running. But this never happened because women were thought to be incomplete and inferior and hence were reduced to acting as house-robots "because, in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned" (Woolf, 1992, p. 29). While money in itself means nothing in the male-dominated world it becomes a source of freedom that neither women or men can escape from. So, the word "money" has an ironic sense for Woolf. The irony is that "money" in itself is a very patriarchal means of conducting the economy. But for a woman to be creative she needs to possess money—because money is a value that is greater than both men and women.

At the heart of the fictionalized narration is Woolf who is looking at the opportunities available to women at the academic and intellectual level owing to their material conditions. Therefore, being a woman in the full sense of the term would mean being able to possess basic resources for the development of one's body and soul. She concludes that woman's roles were so fixed that they could not even attempt to break the boundaries because everything was predetermined by men. Indeed, in 1900s, even office work was predominantly male and "men were 97.5 percent of the clerical labor force at this time" (Ollenburger & Moore, 1998, p. 90).

Furthermore, Woolf also argued for other interesting subjects that dominate women such as protection. Why do women need to be protected? She finds great amount of prejudice in this as it diminishes the existence of women because men's protection treats women as weak organisms. It is often in the minds of men to protect their wives and their lovers. But this in turn eradicates the character of women and renders them dependent on men. Therefore, women must consider themselves as independent human beings to prevent protection: "remove that protection, expose them to the same exertions and activities, make them soldiers

and sailors and engine-drivers and dock laborers” (Woolf, 1992, p.52). If women possess these opportunities and the positions in a given culture, then the status of women in that particular society would develop differently than in the past.

Woolf also recognizes the concept and the practice of marriage as being forced upon women by men. In the past, if women refused to marry the person chosen by their family, they would have been beaten up and locked in a room and this is reflected in Mary Wollstonecraft’s statement from *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* where she is shown as having no much choice when it came to marriage unlike men: “in the middle rank of life, men, in their youth, as prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties” (Wollstonecraft, 2004, p.65). Emma Goldman (2004, p. 54) also argues for the same thing saying that women have been taught to appreciate and submit to marriage, regardless of making their own decisions because public opinion goes a long way “from infancy, almost the average girl is told that marriage is her ultimate goal; therefore her training and education must be directed towards that end”.

Education, it seems, was not intended for women; the family and its members banned it for little girls and teenagers because they already had an occupation “before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighboring wool-stapler” (Woolf, 1992, p. 61). Yes, marrying someone was her occupation and being someone’s property was the goal of her life - “he is considered the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters” (Austen, 1996, p. 5). The aim of this study was to determine the representations of masculinity as perceived by undergraduate English Language and Literature students in *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf.

Virginia Woolf in her “A Room of One’s Own” focuses on women and contemplates on the ways to make women free. In doing so, Woolf does not explicitly blame men for gender inequality. For this reason, while most studies in the relevant literature focused on female representations, we wanted to find out how men are viewed by the ELL students and whether or not the participants held men responsible for the deprived status of women in the society in those days. In this respect, this study adds to the relevant literature by addressing male representations.

## **Method**

In order to fulfil the purposes of the current research study, qualitative methods were employed. Being a qualitative research model, case studies evaluate an issue specific to a particular situation holistically (Yin, 2009). In this case study, undergraduate English Language and Literature students’ perceptions of the depiction of masculinity were

determined qualitatively. The participants consisted of eleven undergraduate English Language and Literature students in a private university in North Cyprus in the spring semester of 2014-2015. Seven of them were female and four were male.

The data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Opdenakker (2006) argues that semi-structured interviews creates questions in a certain form that are related to the researcher's topic to answer the research questions. Such interviews make way to the opportunity to ask additional questions in the context of providing clarification, detailing or clarification. During the interviews three open-ended questions were posed. However, the participants were encouraged to elaborate their answers by being asked why and how.

With regard to ethical issues, the participants were assured that they would take part in the study with their pseudonyms. They were told that the interviews were going to be recorded and transcribed. The textual data elicited through the interviews were coded first and classified later to reveal the themes. Once the codes were determined and grouped under certain categories, the themes were revealed. The themes were listed in order from the most frequent to the least frequent and tabulated. Each researcher coded one of the open-ended questions (the first question) separately in order to ensure reliability. In order to ensure the validity of the data analysis, the participants' opinions were directly included in quotation marks.

## Results

Three themes were determined through the analysis of the interview data. These themes were found to be male chauvinism, male dominance and male freedom (see Table 1).

Table 1

### *Perceptions of male representations*

Themes	n	%
Male chauvinism	11	100
Male dominance	8	80
Male freedom	5	50

All participants stated that males were presented as superior human beings, which was a belief shaped by the society. Ayse, for example, noted that '*Gender equality does not seem to exist. Men were superior and women were inferior in the society*'. Banu stated that '*Only men were respected in the British society in those days and only men were powerful*'. Eda noted '*Women in those days were dependent on men because they could not earn money and for this reason, men were more powerful and superior*'. Ali said '*Men are not limited in any case in*

*the society but women are always limited*'. Secil argued that *'Men were presented as they had a right to everything but women did not. It was the culture of the society in those days. Women were secondary class.'* Efe stated that *'Men were valuable in the society but women were unimportant'*. As acknowledged by Cansu *'Due to the values of the society in favour of men, men had a sense of entitlement. For this reason, they saw women as their possessions'*. Esma noted *'In those days men were more respected in the society and they were kind of high-up. Women, on the other hand, were inferior to men. These were imposed by the society and taken for granted by men. The professor's words of "the mental, moral, and physical inferiority of women" gives us an idea about men's superiority. The narrator does not blame men for this but sees them as victims of the culture of the society and thus forgives them for their unfair treatment of women'*.

With regard to male dominance, more than half of the participants reported that male dominance was prevalent in the British society in those days. Bora noted that *'Theirs was not an economically free society. This means that only men were free to control their labour and property. Women did not have such a right. Since only males had economic freedom, they kept women under control'*. Cansu said *'In society in those days the mindset was like women were responsible for domestic labour and it was impossible for them to get employed and paid. Since they could not earn money, they were dependent on men and men kept them under control'*. Harun stated that *'Traditional values imposed the idea that household chores were for women and they were not paid for these chores. The idea behind this was that as women were less qualified, they could do these less important chores but men were for more important jobs. Since only men were allowed to work in paid jobs, they were automatically more important than women and thus had the power of controlling women'*. Ali told *'Women had domestic roles in the family and they did not have any social roles. Men had more social roles and only men were respected in the society'*. As noted by Arzu *'Men had power over women economically and socially'*.

In contrast to women who were restricted in many ways, men were free and granted many privileges, such as educational opportunities. Ali reported that *'Education in that society was for men only and women were denied education'*. Ayse stated that *'The society restricted women in many ways and assigned certain roles to men and women. Women were expected to conform to a social role which did not need the development of their inherent skills. For example, they were not encouraged to develop their intellectual abilities'*. Halil argued that *'In those days universities were for men only. The narrator pointed at the contrast between the universities and the women's college. While it had been difficult to find*

*financial and political support for the women's college, when it came to male universities the society raised financial support non stop. Even this shows that the society believed that education was not for women'. Deniz acknowledged that 'The public disapproved female writers and they made fun of them because it was believed that women could not be as creative as men. Most female writers got discouraged and felt restricted because of this. But men were free from any restrictions and limitations. There were double standards in the society'. Esra told that 'The narrator in A Room of One's Own reported that ladies were not allowed to the library unless 'accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction' but men were free to get wherever they wanted. Cem said that 'Though metaphorical women were not allowed to walk on the grass, which showed the irrational restrictions towards women'.*

### **Discussion**

It was found that the participants perceived male representations in *A Room of One's Own* as chauvinist, dominant and free. Although these qualities of men were not directly stated but implied through female representations, the stark contrast between the conditions of men and women was apparent. All participants perceived men as chauvinist. The fact that men were superior to women in every sense and gender inequality in favour of men were found to be due to the culture of the British society in those days. This result went in line with that of Lane (2000) that men and women are not equal until women are provided with the best opportunities. Another finding that men were free and they were provided with educational opportunities unlike women explained the reason for the lack of female novelists in those days. Since women were not encouraged to develop their talents and intellectual abilities, they were raised to be submissive and to be a good wives. Marriage was identified by the society as the ultimate goal of every girl (Goldman, 2004; Wollstonecraft, 2004). Before the intervention the participants were told about the nature of the intervention. Their performance was going to be marked. They were thus told that their participation was optional and that if they did not want to participate, they would be given some other task, such as writing an essay or giving a presentation. All participants were told that they would take place in the study with their pseudonyms, and all participant interviews were recorded upon their consent.

## Conclusion

As the results of this study suggested, men degraded and the subordinated women from the beginning of history. Men were the oppressors and those women who read and heard these stereotypes about women believed in the ideology that women in any given society must be secondary to men. If women were daring enough to dispute this ideology, they would have rebelled earlier in history and the progress of history and gender roles and of course, the image of women would have been different from what it is. This does not mean that women have always been passive beings. It only means that the oppression of women was so great that it did not give expression to the feelings of women. In this regard, further research can delve into female representations in *A Room of One's Own*.

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