

# A Feminist Study of *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf

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## **Abstract**

This study is prepared to present pearls and pitfalls of the feminist thought, and explain Virginia Woolf's ideas of equality between sexes. Woolf's first book *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* are very important for feminist thought. Especially in this study, I'll try to dwell on the book, having been accepted as the most important work of Virginia Woolf, called *A Room of One's Own*.

Virginia Woolf wrote many books and articles about gender apartheid during her life. Especially, she dwelled on the equality. Woolf gave lots of lectures about woman and literature. Woolf wrote *Orlando* in 1928, and in 1929 she wrote *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's first book about feminism. Especially in this book, she dwelled on woman and literature; further more, she described the difficulties they had encountered. In *Orlando*, she describes the struggle between genders.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Virginia Woolf, Man, Woman, Rights*

## **Özet**

Bu çalışma, feminist düşüncenin iyi ve kötü yönünü ortaya koymak ve Virginia Woolf'un cinsiyetler arasındaki eşitlik düşüncelerini açıklamak için hazırlanmıştır. Woolf'un iki kitabı, Kendine Ait Bir Oda ve Orlando, feminist düşünce için çok önemlidir. Özellikle bu çalışmada Virginia Woolf'un en önemli eserlerinden birisi kabul edilen Kendine Ait Bir Oda adlı kitabı üzerinde durmaya çalışacağım.

Virginia Woolf hayatı boyunca cinsiyet ayrımcılığı ile ilgili birçok kitap ve yazı yazmıştır. Özellikle eşitlik üzerinde durmuştur. Woolf kadın ve

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edebiyatla ilgili birçok konferans vermiştir. Woolf Orlando'yu 1928'de Kendine Ait Bir Oda adlı kitabı ise 1929'da yazmıştır. Kendine Ait Bir Oda Woolf'un feminizm ile ilgili ilk kitabıdır. Özellikle bu kitapta kadın ve edebiyat üzerinde durmuş ve onların karşılaştıkları zorlukları anlatmıştır. Orlando'da ise Woolf cinsiyetler arasındaki mücadeleyi anlatıyor.

***Anahtar Kelimeler:** Feminizm, Virginia Woolf, Kadın, Erkek, Haklar.*

## **Introduction**

Feminism is a theory based on the principle equality of woman and man both in social and economical field. As every current, feminism has two faces; good and bad. But feminism should not be understood to have been an event, threatening the social structure. As every movement, it is normal to have good, weak and strong side; so does feminism.

As it is known, when it is analysed, woman is seen like a commodity of amusement and utilized like that in the historical process, still continuing more or less. So, can we call this process freedom on behalf of women? I think people, having real feminist thought are opposed the use of women as a commodity.

Nowadays many feminist writer agree that feminism is not for the benefit of woman, but having been hid behind a big lie to use women as slaves. For example Christian Delphy agrees that woman is a toy of capitalism. Christina Hoff Sommers states that feminism is a women's movement, not being able to see the truths.

Of course there have been periods that men and women do not have the equal rights in history. From time to time they have struggled a lot to use these rights; which should be treated with respect. Many feminist writers made a bid for protecting the rights of women and to be able to set up the system based on the equality of principle. One of the important points that they dwell on is, women cannot have the equal work enviroment and rights. David Conwey says: 'It is true that the number of working women is less; but the reason for that is not the men dominance. This is based on the physical and mental structure between sexes.'(Conway, David: 2000).

An important writer in the field of feminism is Virginia Woolf and she indited her work called *A Room of One's Own* in 1929. This work is accepted as one of the basic beginning texts of feminist criticism. Mostly known by her novels, Virginia Woolf with this experiment work attracted spectacularly big attention. In the book, fictionalized as an answer to a speech demand upon women and fictional letters, in some ways, Virginia Woolf's intellectual story and the relationship between women and fictional letters have been discussed.

The writer categorises this relationship into three interrelated dimensions: women and what they look like, women and literature they reveal, women and writings about them; moreover, from the very beginning of the book, she presents the reasons why she has written about feminism in her book, and throughout the book she explains them by the answer for the relationship between women and fictional literature, a woman's desire to write to earn money for a living, having a permanent income and a room of her own and privacy.

### **A Woman Should Be Herself**

The main examples can be quoted all the time from the book suggest the negative sides of the rights that women did not have but men had at the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century. Our writer came across an angry and awestruck beadle while she was walking on the grass thoughtfully in Oxbridge because walking on the grass was forbidden for the female students and lecturers. They could just walk on the gravel path. At the end of this path the officer signed her to turn back by using his hands because little ladies could be allowed to enter the library if they had a student accompanying with or reference letter.

*A Room of One's Own* written in 1929 was a classical novel of the feminism. Women's movement(feminism) is glued to the book called *A Room of One's Room* might be the easiest Virginia Woolf's book to read. The subject is too concrete: "*Woman and Literature. There is an eternal and overwhelming question, asked women by men insistently. Since you say so why could not you have a genius like Shakespeare?*" (Woolf, Virginia:1945) That's why Virginia Woolf gave a drastic answer to this offending question after getting to the bottom of historical relations and taking a brief look at the

books in the library. And told women this: "*Earn money, have your own room and create spare time. And write, without thinking what the men say!*" (Ibid) Afterwards it is recognized that there is a dog's perspective in *Flush* written by Virginia Woolf.

In the book the meals which are served in Fernham College, seems like Woolf's aunt's Newham College that is just for women, where the writer is going to make a speech are really humiliating as compared with the ones served to the men in Oxbridge. Woolf thinks that if somebody can not eat good meal, he/she would not love or sleep well. In other words "*the good sides of life have to wait*" Woolf believed that the money which was spent for the religion, but it was sent to the university base when age or reason came. Just because of the fewness of the people who want women to get education caused universities to become men's schools.

However if only mothers could have brought a fortune, there and in the other women schools the subject would be science and wisdom. Unfortunately it is not only hard for women to earn money, but also women weren't allowed to own it (the money).

The book examines the preconceived difference between genders while liaising the women and fiction. Thinking of men's richness and women's poorness forces Woolf to consider the main circumstances of creating an art work. "*If a person cannot eat well, he/she would not think properly*" this sentence which is said at the beginning of the book tells that a person can be an artist not with raw imagination concentration and creativity but by developing and satisfying these talents in the adequate conditions. Poetical brilliance was mostly germinated among the wealthy people as it is shown in the examples of the book's end. That's why she emphasises the importance of money and a room of one's own so strongly. Virginia Woolf is a necessarily and sufficiently educated writer from her childhood. Her father is one of the best writers in the world besides she rejects all the proposals, honors and titles given by academy because she deserves to carry the honor which is not corrupted with the maqam and seat.

The book, looking for the reasons of inequivalancy and the answer of the question why women are poor on the British Museum's shelves says that

it is impossible to find this answer because the complete works written on women by men always coincide with each others. Mussolini hated women while Goethe honored them. On the other hand another professor drew up the weakness of women's intelligence, soul and physical. And the writer says the dominant belief, the main mentality tells that it is caused by such professors and the anger feeling. Virginia Woolf called women to fight against the ideal British Women form of Victorian Period and in that book writer remarks that it has to be taken off the title called "saved gender" and also if babysitters could be workers they would be everything. But it shouldn't be forgotten that mothering is not worse than advocacy. Forgetting mothering is not the way of reminding this to men and mensmind society. In the same way saving virginity bounding the sexuality does not mean that it is free for men but taboo for women. Breaking taboos should not be claimed to make women free. Accepting ethicalness is right. The feminist movement led by Woolf may demand to have their own room and constant income at the risk of corrupting their society and new generation while giving up Victorian angle women and also mothering and exagrate opposing natality.

For these reasons in this term the book telling that the tracks of a woman's brilliance could not be seen in the recorded lines came for breaking the enmity of women writers and *A Room of One's Own*, added that overcoming with economical problems is not enough. Man's West Literature's lines continued the belief of women's being at the bottom. The result of it is discouraging for women, having to except or try to prove the opposite idea made women disappointed. In the other words this means that the intelligence and soul must be clear and in harmony to show up the creativity effort and must not try to defend or prove herself. At that point the examples for this negative effort and the intelligence and soul's being away from clearness were shown in the lines of noblewomen, having the chance of writing something. Middle class women started to write and could earn money as a writer in the middle of 18th century.

19th century could be seen as the novel era of middle class women. The reasons of it was told in the book like this: "The literature education that women got was character analysis and emotion examination. The close relatives were always with them. They didn't have their own room and

their studies usually were studying in the living room at the risk of being interrupted. So they wrote novels. It might be just because it hadn't been formed yet and also been a new kind literature. In this era not being a traditional example, made women writers begin their own custom. However the women wrote without hate, fear, resistance and preaching. They gave up changing their value judgement to agree with the others.

The author, towards the end of the book, mentions reading the novel of a male author, and says that: "It was really pleasing to read what a male author has written again. After all the novels I read that's been written by female authors, this one was really direct and explicit." He was displaying a great amount of freedom of opinion, personal freedom and self confidence. The reader was feeling a comfort in front of this well nourished, well educated, never been opposed, but at the same time, he/she was respecting to the right of reaching wherever he wants since the day he was born. But it was easy to feel the ego behind the book and the emotions couldn't express more ideas anymore.

All of the conclusions, reached under this statement are that to think about the gender of the author is fatal. The important thing is, the two genders should work together. There shouldn't be any differences in their mind, like in their body. Before the art of the writing, we see that there should be a cooperation between males and females, and for females, the road to this cooperation passes from the money she has and her room. We also see that she should have the habit of the freedom and courage of writing the ideas word for word.

The most famous novel of Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, tells about two things; woman, and literature. Those two keywords aren't really as simple as they seem. When you think about them profoundly, you see that they're actually a lot more important than that. The social gender matter, the presence of a patriarchal community, the inequalities in education, the fact that women cannot appear in history, or the scarcity of the appearance of women in the history are the main things told in the book. In order to be creative in terms of intellectuality, women need a room of their own. In this paradigm, two important questions appear: Why is the world of the writing is more difficult for women than it is for men, and the solution of Woolf for

this hardships, having a room, what does it mean? First of all, Woolf tells us at the beginning of the book that she couldn't study in Oxbridge just because she was a woman. At this point, it must be known that Oxbridge is a blending of the words Oxford and Cambridge. This information, tells us that at that time, it was forbidden for females to attend universities. And then, Woolf asks that famous question:

### **What would happen if Shakespeare had a skilled sister named Judith?**

It's not really hard to make some predictions about that. While Shakespeare continues his education and becomes an important figure of a theater and writing, Judith cannot go to school. When her family wants her to marry, she follows her skills and runs away. When she applies to a theater in order to fulfill her dreams, she is faced with the truth of no women can join theater. Finally, she becomes pregnant from a manager who feels bad for her. She cannot carry her poet soul that is caged in her body, and commits suicide. The only reason Judith commits suicide is because she couldn't be strong in the intellectual, professional, social and political world just because she was a woman. This imaginary sister, clearly shows us the likely ending of a skilled woman.

Then Woolf, talks about the difficulties women face because of the social conditions. It is obvious that the most difficult ones are the limitations in the family. The world of home/family locks the woman up in the house and isolates her from the public area. In this sense, maybe the most important one is the motherhood issue. Because most of the time, while the husband continues his life on the outside, the women should look after her child. Woolf compares the writing a text (with the metaphor of giving birth) and biological motherhood. But most of the time, to make this decision is not in the hands of the women. For a woman that doesn't have any rights or money, it's impossible to even dream a life other than marrying a good man and being locked up in the house. In the house, woman has a huge amount of things to do such as food, cleaning the nurture of the children. And while doing these things, it's impossible for woman to become creative.

*A Room of One's Own*, is based on two conference texts, given by Woolf in 1928 in Newnham and Girton Universities. But this information shouldn't

fool us to think that the book is based on reality. Just the opposite, the book is pure fiction. At the beginning of the book, Woolf says that:

I think I don't need to say the thing I'm about to tell, Oxbridge, and "I" is not real. Some lies will pour from my lips, but inside this lies, there can be some reality mixed in them. I leave it to the reader to find this reality and pull it out and to decide that it has a chapter that worth hiding.

One of the interesting details almost the same as this one, is that the book doesn't have only one narrator. She continues:

*"You can call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or any other name you want to give me. It doesn't really matter."*

One of the reasons of this conscious choice may be the struggle of destroying the authority of the narrator in the narrative. If we go deeper in this issue, we can come to the conclusion of Woolf trying to destroy the bond between the author and the authority and try to cripple the bond between the authority and the males in the means of literary. Because of these reasons we talked about, Woolf has a strong and extraordinary bond between her readers. And maybe, because of that reason, reading *A Room of One's Own* makes the reader feel like chatting with Virginia Woolf herself about her true identity and beyond the time. Woolf, first of all gives us the answers for why being an author is harder for women than it is for men. We can put what she said about this on this order:

The difficulties of getting education for women and the limitations brought by the family life.

Woolf primarily explains that just because she is a woman, it is forbidden for her to have an education at Oxbridge at the beginning of the book. At that point, it is important to state that Oxbridge is derived from the names of Oxford and Cambridge universities. This information reveals the impossibility of a girl having an education at university in that period. Then, Woolf asks this renowned question:

"What would have happened if Shakespeare had had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith?"

It is not difficult to imagine this possible scenario: While Shakespeare proceeds on his education and he carves out a niche for himself in theater and literature, Judith is not sent to school. When her family wants to marry her, she runs away following her talent. When she applies for a job to

a theater with the purpose of realizing her dream like Shakespeare has done, she comes face to face with an answer that any woman cannot be an actress. Ultimately, she is impregnated by a manager feeling pity for her. She cannot sustain her poet's spirit trapped in a woman body and she commits suicide! What would be the reason of Judith's suicide instead of not being able to find a way to gain power at intellectual, professional, social and political fields just because of being a woman? (Squier, Susan M.: 1985) This imaginary sister displays explicitly the possible end of a gifted woman's life.

Then, Woolf makes mention of inequalities and some difficulties that women have because of social conditions. It has been seen that these social conditions include specifically and mostly family life restrictions. Domestic/family life confines woman to the home and isolates her from public sphere. In this framework, the most important issue is probably motherhood issue. For the reason that the woman is supposed to take care of her child at home whereas her husband maintains his life mostly at outside. Woolf sees writing/production processes as biologic motherhood with respect to the metaphor of giving birth to a text. (Abel, Elizabeth: 1993) But mostly, this selection is also beyond women' power. It is impossible even to desire another option apart from marrying a very nice man, confining herself to the domestic life for a woman not having enough money and rights. And the woman undertakes the domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning and child caring attributed to them. After all, that the woman can be creative is out of the question due to these domestic tasks. Also, Virginia Woolf expresses at her book, *A Room of One's Own*, as:

*"...For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished" (Woolf, V. :1945).*

Depending on all inequalities, difficulties mentioned above, Woolf concludes that women have only one opportunity to overcome all of them and produce something new going beyond nothingness. A room of her own, first of all, means a place and time that a woman can conduct intellectual studies without being disturbed, away from difficulties and responsibilities and that is directly associated with economic freedom. However, more

important thing is that Woolf advises the women, first of all, on being free in mind and then writing. "According to Virginia Woolf, writing itself is a crucial part of feminism transited from private sphere to public sphere." (Snaith, Anna: 2003) So, Woolf has a crucial advice for women at that point. To write. Write not giving up, without taking the current situation into consideration, thinking on whether your writings would be successful, considering other people's thoughts about your writings! As she expresses the following at one of the last pages of *A Room of One's Own*:

*"So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery, and the sacrifice of wealth and chastity which used to be said to be the greatest of human disasters, a mere flea-bite in comparison."* (Ibid).

Briefly, Virginia Woolf wants women to be free in every field. She states that the rights given to men about working with equal rights as men, fair wages or equal pay, having equal right in education and sex equality should be given to women, as well.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I emphasize especially the contributions of feminism to women's life and the things that women should do to have equal rights. As I express in the beginning of my study, it has better to state both good and bad sides of feminism when evaluating it. There are of course, some people and groups that use feminism to get privileges as well as writers that are sincere in what they say on the subject of feminism. I concentrate on *A Room of One's Own*, a notable work, among masterpieces of Virginia Woolf, a prominent feminist writer, as a reference in this study.

The woman shall definitely write and publish her writings if she is literally willing to express herself and fight for the idea that women should have equal rights as men. It is true that women fall behind men in some fields, so it is inevitable for them to produce new things in the academic field instead of blaming the opposite sex for this situation.

Consequently, I might express that I agree with Woolf on many subjects, especially the subjects of education, job opportunities and the matter of deserving the same respect at the community. Moreover, as Woolf state women and men should not be opponents, they should create something putting their heads together. A woman and a man are like two sides of face. It is impossible that the woman might be successful by ostracizing him or man might be successful by ostracizing her at 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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