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## Virginia Woolf's "Profession for Women": Examining Women's Professional Experiences.

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### Abstract

Virginia Woolf's essay "Profession for Women" is revived from her speech delivered on January 21, 1931 at the National Society for Women's Service. It was later published in her collection of essays entitled, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays (1942)*. Woolf starts the essay by addressing the most important feminist question, what is a woman? And goes on to elaborate on her own experience of being a women writer; a profession which is male dominated. She describes the difficulties faced by narrating her own story and incorporating in it various allusions, symbols and personifications and metaphors. She also suggests why writing is the best profession women can adopt. In the process, she highlights the inherent inequality present in the social milieu of the society that does not perceive women as professionals but as homemakers. The present paper aims to study by a feminist approach the struggles faced by women in all professions with a focus on women writers, by analysing Woolf's personal experiences. The focus will be on the critical analysis of the various techniques used by Woolf to enhance the gender discrimination faced by women. The paper will also study how women are still struggling for social, economic and professional equality in the modern times.

Keywords: Women employment, Gender discrimination, Women writers and Women writing.

"Like other women writers of my class, I am expected to tame my talent to suit the  
Comfort of my family."

— Kamala Suraiyya Das

Virginia Woolf is one of the most famous modernist English novelist and essayist of the twentieth century. Her work is known for the exploitative use of the narrative technique

stream of consciousness. She was an ardent feminist, anti-imperialist, anti-colonist and a pacifist. Her work examines the role of women in literature. She brought forth the idea that for a woman to be successful; she needs a room of her own and money. In her entire professional career, Woolf gave a lot of speeches at various universities, colleges and other professional institutions. The present essay is also a speech, which she delivered at the National Society for Women's Service, addressing an audience full of professional women. In her speech, she gives examples for her personal experience as a journalist and a novelist. She highlights the obstacles a woman is likely to face as a writer. However, she steps out to generalise these obstacles to other professional fields as well. In the end, she advises the group to face the obstacles with courage, for with their personal experience will they be able to describe and define what is a woman?.

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Woman Destroyed* comments, "A straightforward, genuine, "authentic" woman, without mean-mindedness, uncompromising, but at the same time understanding, indulgent, sensitive, deeply feeling, intensely aware of things and of people, passionately devoted to those she loved and creating happiness for them. A fine life, serene, full, "harmonious." It is dark: I cannot see myself anymore. And what do the others see? Maybe something hideous." (111). Woolf describes the same contradictory nature of women as supplied by the patriarchal society by the example of the angel of the house. For Beauvoir, these contradiction seem to fade away, when a woman starts to write her experiences on the paper, she writes, "In life, you're constantly denying yourself, and others are always contradicting you. On paper, I make time stand still and I impose my convictions on the whole world; they become the only reality." (75). Woolf states that by killing the phantom of the angel of the house, she was able to find her true self as a writer and that the society, specially the men were surprised when she wrote about the areas such as morality, sex, the unconscious, however, it was only after she had addressed these area, she realised herself as a woman and a novelist.

Addressing the all women audience of The Women's Service League, Woolf remarks that, as she was invited by the secretary of the society to address the audience about employment of women, it was suggested that she talks about her own professional experience. To which she admits, "It is true I am a woman; it is true I am employed; but what professional experiences have I had? It is difficult to say." (235). Her difficulty pertains to her field of employment which she admits is literature, a field which is male dominated, like other professions. She

says that literature involves a retelling of experiences involving the human world, a world which contains both men and women. However, the world of literature abounds in stories that tell only about experiences of men. She says that in the profession of literature, “here are fewer experiences for women than in any other, with the exception of the stage — fewer, I mean, that are peculiar to women” (235).

Woolf then discloses the reason why she adopted writing as a profession. She says that, “when I came to write, there were very few material obstacles in my way” (add). She names a few predecessors like Fanny Burney, Aphra Behn, Harriet Martineau, Jane Austen, George Eliot, who had smoothed the road before her. Therefore, the male dominating world was not surprised by her choice of profession. Highlighting the absence of material obstacles, she notes that, writing as a profession is very pocket friendly. Writing paper and pencil can be brought for ten and a sixpence. Comparatively, the other professions demand a lot of material things, which can make a hole in your pocket, citing some she adds, “Pianos and models, Paris, Vienna and Berlin, masters and mistresses, are not needed by a writer” (235). She concludes that cheap availability of material is one of the reasons as to why, women have opted for writing as profession and have succeeded in it, than any other professions. Citing other reasons she writes, “Writing was a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen.” (235). Reputable because a women could write from her home and harmless to both her family and the patriarchal society, who view women’s writing as a mere scratching of a pen, since women are less intelligent than men to discover stories and write them. Family peace refers to the fact that women could look after the family, her children and her house, while being a writer, since her presence could be availed by the family all the time, especially her husband.

Woolf then starts narrating to the audience her own story, which she admits is simple. She asks the audience to imagine a girl in a bedroom with a pen and paper. The girl, “had only to move that pen from left to right — from ten o’clock to one” (235). As a women writer, her ways, her methods, her themes and even her timings of writing were limited and pre-decided by the male dominating society. Woolf says with all the limitations imposed, she decided to do something that was simple and easy for her and as a result she became a journalist. She wrote an article and mailed it to the editor. She writes, my effort was rewarded on the first day of the following month — a very glorious day it was for me — by a letter from an editor containing a cheque for one pound ten shillings and sixpence” (235). However, she admits that she still did not know the struggles and difficulties of a professional woman and

therefore, instead of spending the money on basic amenities, she brought herself a person cat. Thus, by narrating this anecdote, Woolf highlights her unawareness of professionalism and reasons that, therefore, she did not deserve to be called professional women back then.

Next, Woolf describes that article that she wrote was a review about a novel written by a famous man. She declares that it was during writing her review; she first encountered the difficulties of the job. She terms these difficulties as a phantom, a ghost and further, discovered that the ghost was a woman, whom she later named after the heroine of the famous poem, “The Angel in the House”. This Victorian poem is written by Coventry Patmore, published in 1854. It is an account of the role of women in the Victorian society, that gave birth to the ideology of the different spheres for man and women. Women were therefore relegated to the private or domestic sphere with the role of caretaker of the house and the children, whereas, men were relegated to the public sphere, that included work outside home and other civic duties. The women in the poem became an embodiment of the ideal Victorian wife who is submissive to her husband and the Victorian mother, who was devoted to her children.

Woolf goes on to describe the woman, she says,

“She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it — in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all — I need not say it — she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty — her blushes, her great grace” (236).

Woolf in the above lines is criticising the position held by women in the Victorian age. She refers to the socially constructed gender roles and gender stereotypes that laid out specific qualities, which every Victorian woman had to imbibe. In fact, these qualities were thought as to be inherent in women. These qualities further chalked out roles for women that held them captive in the four walls of the house, and the job of the caretaker. As a home maker, she should be sympathetic and unselfish and should cater to needs of others before hers. She sacrificed her needs, her desires and her ambition to achieve the perfect family life. Woolf then strikes the audiences as she tells them that this woman was constituted, like an organization. As Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* remarks, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (301). Who constituted her were the patriarchal architects who

designed her without a mind or a heart of her own, something like a modern day remote control Robot. Moreover, she was recognised by her only quality which was purity, of the soul and of the body. It was her chief ornament.

Woolf calls this woman a phantom and tells her audience that she killed her. She then lists her reasons for killing her. Woolf says that she killed her because “she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her.”....And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: “My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.” And she made as if to guide my pen” (237). Woolf tells her audience by the example of the angel in the house, how the present day women are shadowed by her mother and grandmother. How the patriarch society targets the young women by constructing an ideal angel of the house, who comes to haunt anyone who tries to be different. However, Woolf highlights that it was the woman who became the guide of her pen, it was the patriarchal society disguised as the angel of the house that came to direct her pen, with the result that killed her own individuality. In the words of Woolf, if she would have not killed the phantom, “She would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (237), and she terms this act as self-defence.

Woolf explains that this is how she learnt another professional lesson, which she states, “you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex” (237). However, the biggest contradiction encountered by Woolf was that, “according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must — to put it bluntly — tell lies if they are to succeed” (237). Woolf highlights that according to prevalent gender stereotypes, women are not allowed to questions truths about areas like human relations, sex and morality. She tells that every time she sat to write, she encountered the angel of the house, and the struggle of killing her was very hard. Thus, by telling the story of the angel of the house, she teaches the audience another very important lesson of women professionalism. She quotes, “But it was a real experience; it was an experience that was bound to befall all women writers at that time. Killing the Angel in the House was part of the

occupation of a woman writer” (237). Her experience can be interpreted in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “he rarely feels a bold creativeness, and usually she lacks the technique of self-expression; but in her conversation, her letters, her literary essays, her sketches, she manifests an original sensitivity. The young girl throws herself into things with ardour, because she is not yet deprived of her transcendence; and the fact that she accomplishes nothing, that she is nothing, will make her impulses only the more passionate. Empty and unlimited, she seeks from within her nothingness to attain All.”(285).

Woolf continues her story and admits that after receiving her first salary and buying the cat, she became more ambitious and set her goal of buying a motor car and just like that she became a novelist. She admits that writing novels and telling stories are more delightful experience than reviewing other people’s novels. She then narrates her professional experience as a novelist. She then tells some professional secrets about being a novelist. As such she stresses that, “I say that a novelist’s chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible. He has to induce in himself a state of perpetual lethargy. He wants life to proceed with the utmost quiet and regularity. He wants to see the same faces, to read the same books, to do the same things day after day, month after month, while he is writing, so that nothing may break the illusion in which he is living — so that nothing may disturb or disquiet the mysterious nosings about, feelings round, darts, dashes and sudden discoveries of that very shy and illusive spirit, the imagination. I suspect that this state is the same both for men and women” (238).

This time Woolf asks her audience so imagine her in a trance. She says that, “I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot” (238). This time she describes the image of a, “fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water” (238). She says like the fisherman, the girl’s imagination has reached depths and dark places, however, the moment it reached there, there was an explosion and everywhere was confusion. She says that,

“To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of — what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her

artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over”  
(239).

Thus, by the example of the fisherman, Woolf explains the audience that women are not allowed to write about the body, its desires and passions. These themes are thought to be unfair for women's writing and if she still managed to do so, the patriarchy will be shocked and as result, she couldn't write anymore. She condemns such double standards, where men experience greater freedom in choosing their stories and women are robbed of such freedom. These two experiences of Woolf are like two important adventures of her professional life. She writes that, “The first — killing the Angel in the House — I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful — and yet they are very difficult to define” (239). Woolf underlines that, on the outside, writing a novel looks very easy, but inside there are still many phantoms and rocks that pose threats to the imagination of women and kill her freedom of expression. She calls, literature the freest of professions, still by her experience she underlines the prejudices that as a women writer she had to face and overcome. She then generalises her experience as a professional women and tells her audience that her experiences will be no different than their experiences. She the strikes the central ides of her speech, as she tells that, “Even when the path is nominally open — when there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, a civil servant — there are many phantoms and obstacles, as I believe, looming in her way” (240).

She concludes her speech by advising her audience to share their professional experiences, so that the difficulties can be discussed and solved. She asks them to utilise and decorate the rooms of their own, which they have gained after a long struggle with men. Just as Beauvoir states,

“Art, literature, and philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on a human freedom: that of the creator; to foster such an aim, one must first unequivocally posit oneself as a freedom. The restrictions that education and custom impose on a woman limit her grasp of the universe...Indeed, for one to become a creator, it is not enough to be cultivated, that is, to make going to shows and meeting people part of one's life; culture must be apprehended through the free movement of a transcendence; the spirit with all its riches must project itself in an empty sky that is its to fill; but if a thousand fine bonds tie it to the earth, its surge is broken. The

girl today can certainly go out alone, stroll in the Tuileries; but I have already said how hostile the street is: eyes everywhere, hands waiting: if she wanders absentmindedly, her thoughts elsewhere, if she lights a cigarette in a cafe, if she goes to the cinema alone, an unpleasant incident can quickly occur; she must inspire respect by the way she dresses and behaves: this concern rivets her to the ground and self. "Her wings are clipped.".....Yet such experiences have an inestimable impact: this is how an individual in the headiness of freedom and discovery learns to look at the entire world as his fief...[The girl] may feel alone within the world: she never stands up in front of it, unique and sovereign" (128).

In the entire speech, she elaborates on her experiences and gives certain advises but the most important point that Woolf raises is, "what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill" (238). She says that the only reason why she had agreed to address the audience today was out of respect for all the women of the audience, who by their experiences will tell the world, what a woman is and by their successes and failure will enlighten the younger generations about this extremely important piece of information.

Virginia Woolf in her essay "Profession for Women" discloses the obstacles faced by herself as a women writer. She does so by using various symbols, allusions and parallelism. She uses the angel of the house as a symbol of image of a Victorian woman. It is also a symbol of the prejudice and brutality of men as she described it with word like tormented, bother etc. She studies the parallel experience of the women writers before her and her own experiences. She tells her audience the various professional lessons she has learnt both as a journalist and a novelist. By describing her obstacles, she prepares the young enthusiastic women crowd in front of her to never let their demons haunt them and advises them to kill such phantoms by citing her own examples.





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