Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own"

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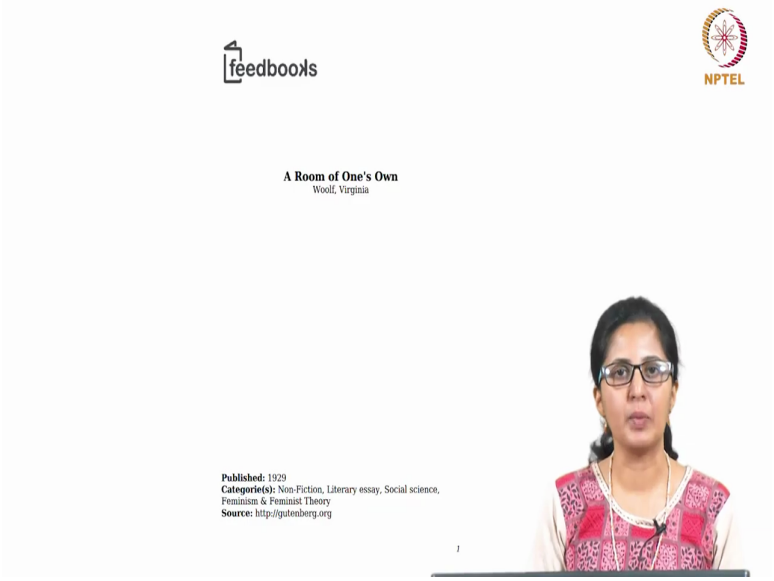

Hello and welcome to today's session. We are looking at this 1929 essay by Virginia Woolf titled *A Room of One's Own*. This is supposedly an extension of a lecture that Woolf gave in two of the women's colleges in Cambridge-- Newnharn and Girton in 1928. This essay is an extended version of that lecture which she had given and this work is considered as a milestone as far as

feminist critical thought is concerned, especially from the early 20th century onwards. And many of the things that Woolf speaks about in this essay are considered very radical given the timeframe during which she was composing this.

She was also writing at a time when women's writing had not really began to flourish. And here she looks at the material conditions, the non-literary conditions, which are also important to facilitate the writing of literature. She looks at the many socio-historical elements, which have also become very determinant in promoting women's literature or not allowing women's literature to flourish the same way that men's writing had been flourishing.

She tries to locate this entire question within the historical framework, but in a very unconventional way altogether. She begins this essay by addressing the question of, she was originally asked to talk about women in fiction, so she begins on that note and then she moves on to discuss many things which had not been brought to the forefront until that point of time. She brings this question of why women have not been able to write, or what are the conditions that are necessary to facilitate women's writing. That sort of a question had not been addressed before and she brings that question into the forefront and encourages other writers, thinkers and critics to engage with it in a very upfront manner.

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This essay is divided into five different parts, and she talks about these concepts that she is trying to articulate within different contexts. She gives some imaginary situations, she gives some hypothetical situations and then she places her arguments and her discussions within those contexts.

This is how the essay begins, “But you may say we asked you to speak about women and fiction. What has that got to do with A Room of One's Own?” She is trying to justify this title *A Room of One's Own*, when she had been asked to speak particularly about women and fiction. “I will try to explain. When you asked me to speak about women and fiction, I sat down on the banks of the river and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean simply a few remarks about Fanny Burney, a few more about Jane Austen”. She is trying to list out the stellar writers who had left a mark in the field which could be considered as women’s writing-- women who had written exemplary fiction. “…a tribute to the Brontes, a sketch of Haworth parsonage under snow, some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford, a respectful allusion to George Eliot, a reference to Mrs Gaskell and one would have done.” When one begins to sit down and think about women and fiction, there are of course a set of names that come to your mind, but Woolf wants to tell us that it is not entirely about that. “But at second sight the words seemed not so simple. The title Women and Fiction might mean and you may have meant it to mean women and what they are like, or it might mean women and the fiction that they write.”

It is not just about picking, flagging the individuals, the women, who had written fiction. “Or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them, or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light.” So, it is not a simple equation, when one begins to talk about women and fiction, it could be about the kind of fiction that women write or could be the kind of fiction within which women are written about. Here Woolf tells us that she wants to look at all of these things in tandem when she is talking about women and fiction, which is why this title is very interesting and a very esoteric kind of title *A Room of One's Own.*

“But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfil what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer to hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever.” So, this is not a discussion to which she has solutions.

It is not a well-laid out set of arguments and a set of solutions that she is possibly able to hand out and that, she says, is perhaps the limitation of this talk that she is about to deliver. The limitation of this essay that she is about to write and by saying this she is also inviting the participation of the readers or audience, in saying that this is a question perhaps we collectively need to engage with. It is not that she is standing in this privileged position in order to give solutions and put forward worthy arguments in favour of solutions, in favour of the questions and the concerns that she is raising. But on the other hand, this is more like a discussion, this is more like a participatory discussion that she wants to have.

“All I could do was to offer you an opinion about one minor point.” You see the modesty with which she is approaching this subject and the hesitation with which she is approaching the subject. And as an aside it would be useful also to recall that, it is said that after having given these lectures in these two colleges, in these two women's colleges, Woolf wasn’t entirely happy. She thought that the lecture did not go down really well. And then some of her friends were even surprised that she chose to write an extensive essay on this topic and chose to publish an extended version.

But this also tells us that this is something that Woolf herself had been struggling with and that is a minor point that she tries to make. But we really begin to understand, towards the end of this essay that it is not really a minor point. It is all about focusing and highlighting the various conditions, which should come together perhaps, in order to allow women to write, in order to facilitate women's writing, in order to allow them, in order to make them visible in the forefront.

This is the opinion that she offers, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves a great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.” We find that she has moved very radically away from literature, from literary concerns, from fiction and she is addressing a real economic and social condition. What is a point that she is trying to make, which she also says is her opinion?

“A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”. It talks about the material conditions. It talks about the financial support that she should possibly get, it talks about the conducive ambience, a conducive atmosphere which is provided within the domestic space. A room of one's own and money if she is to write fiction.

I have shirked the duty of coming to a conclusion upon these two questions-- women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems. But in order to make some amends, I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money”. So we find that a lecture which is supposedly on women and fiction has moved away to room and money. Virginia Woolf is about to tell us how this equation fits, how this is not really a departure. But this is part of the main discussion that she is about to have on women and fiction; that it is impossible to have a discussion on women and fiction unless we talk about the room and the money which facilitates this production, or the room and the money which would also empower these women.

“I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought which led me to think this.” She, as pointed out at the outset, Virginia Woolf is inviting her audience to participate in this train of thought. “Perhaps if I lay bare the ideas, the prejudices that lie behind the statement, you will find that they have some bearing upon women and some upon fiction. At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial-- and any question about sex is that-- one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold.”

Look at the way in which here, the opinion and the individual arguments are being privileged vis-à-vis truth. Truth and rationality which are considered as *the* things which validate. We find that Virginia Woolf is completely debunking them and saying that in such matters, in such controversial matters, in such matters on which we cannot perhaps reach a consensus, you can only have an opinion and give a logical train of thought to how you arrived at that opinion. It is not possible to talk about "the truth" and "the fact" as it has been happening. "One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker."

She is exposing herself over here. She is laying herself bare over here, saying that it is not that she has the truth or solutions to offer before this audience. But on the other hand, she is confident that she is able to unpack the seemingly neat way in which women and fiction have been seen together and to show to the audience that there are many underlying things, for instance, the room, the money, which are involved in this facilitation of the production. And also, more importantly, she is encouraging the audience to arrive at their own conclusions, which is why she states, right at the outset of this essay, that it is an opinion that she has to offer on this matter.

It is not a conclusive solution and it is not the truth for that matter. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact and she is looking at fiction also in a very different way altogether, "Therefore, I propose making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here—how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it and made it work in and out of my daily life. I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence. Oxbridge is an invention."

Here, it is a hybrid term as we know, Oxford and Cambridge, and those are traditionally seen as very male, very elite universities. And she is contrasting Oxbridge-- which she says is an invention, but we know that it is not really so, and so is Fernham-- Fernham is a women's college that she hypothetically intends to contrast with Oxbridge. "I is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being." So, there is a hypothetical situation she presents over here, but it is also very experiential and this has been presented in such dramatic fictional ways. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them.

So, this is the kind of allowance that she takes. This is how she is also bailing herself out of this situation by saying I am only a fictional writer and do not expect any amount of truth in it. But at the same time you may find some vestiges of truth in this and that might also help you to arrive to certain kinds of conclusions.

"It is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping, if not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste paper basket and forget all about it". This is modesty and confidence, two ironical things that come together, with which she is addressing the audience. "Here then was I called me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name, you please". The name really it does not matter; it is about this symbol. It is about this identity, this female identity that she is carrying. It could be Mary anyone. It is not a matter of any importance.

So this Mary, this fictional character, this imaginary character is sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather lost in thought. "That collar I have spoken of, women and fiction, the need of coming to some conclusion on a subject that raises all sorts of prejudices and passions, bowed my head to the ground. To the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson, glowed with the colour, even it seemed burnt with the heat, of fire." The writer in her also comes out over here. You can read through this description, this is very interesting description entirely on your own.

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And then she gets onto the crux of the matter. “It was thus that I found myself walking with extreme rapidity across a grass plot. Instantly a man’s figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object in a cut-away coat and evening shirt were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation.” She is being encountered over here, she is intercepted over here. Mind you, she is trying to have these intellectual thoughts and discussions about the lecture that she has to deliver very soon. “Instinct rather than reason came to my help, he was a beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path; only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. Such thoughts were the work of a moment as I regained the path, the arms of the Beadle sank, his face assumed its usual

repose, and though turf is better walking than gravel, no very great harm was done. The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf which has been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had sent my little fish into hiding."

This is what the 300 year old legacy of this particular university does to a woman, that is the point that Woolf is trying to highlight over here. "What idea it had been that had sent me so audaciously trespassing, I could not now remember." She is seen as a trespasser over there, regardless of the kind of scholarship that she possesses, regardless of the kind of intellectual engagements that she is capable of having.

"The spirit of peace descended like a cloud from heaven, for if the spirit of peace dwells anywhere it is in the courts and quadrangles of Oxbridge on a fine October morning". She is being very sarcastic over here. This is how these portals have been traditionally seen as, they are also, she reminds us, very male and very elite.And it is not an easy task for a woman to gain admission let alone into those portals, but in those premises either. One cannot let oneself go in those premises either if one does not happen to be in the right category, in this case male.

"Strolling through those colleges passes, those ancient halls the roughness of the present seemed smoothed away; the body seemed contained in a miraculous glass cabinet through which no sound could penetrate and a mind free from any contact with facts was at liberty to settle upon whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment". She is giving us these very contrasting images in order to showcase the ways in which women have entirely been kept out of those spaces. Then she thinks about an old essay about revisiting Oxbridge in the long vacation brought Charles Lamb to mind-"Saint Charles, said Thackeray putting a letter of Lamb's to his forehead."

So she thinking about all the things that she read about Oxbridge, and she also realizes that it is not a place where she is very comfortable, very contrary to the kind of things that she had been reading, very contrary to the kind of things that have been fed into the cultural memory about Oxbridge.

"Indeed among all the dead, I give you my thoughts as they came to me." So if you find that another interesting point over here, just as the way she had been using the stream-of-conscious

technique in her fiction, we find that in this lecture and in this essay also she is giving the audience her thoughts as they came to her.

It is very unprocessed in a certain way, if you could say that and it is also very fresh. It also invites the reader and the audience to be participants to this thought formation, to this journey towards, this train of thought towards a certain possible conclusion. “Lamb is one of the most congenial; one to whom one would have liked to say, Tell me then how you wrote your essays? For his essays are superior even to Max Beerbohm’s, I thought with all the perfection because of that wild flash of imagination(…) Lamb, then came to Oxbridge perhaps a hundred years ago. Certainly he wrote an essay--the name escapes me-- about the manuscript of one of Milton's poems, which he saw here. It was LYCIDAS perhaps” And she is thinking about all the things that she has read about Oxbridge through the male writers, through their perceptions and through their experiences. And she thinks about Charles Lamb who could write an essay on Milton's LYCIDAS because he had accessed the manuscripts in the library.

Then she thinks she should perhaps make her way to this same library which had perhaps acted as a muse for this congenial writer Lamb and what awaits her. “But here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself” And this is an experiential thing and by saying at the outset of this narration that this is also a fictional, Woolf we find over here is trying to dramatize this entire situation, the drama is accentuated over here.

Here is Virginia Woolf who is trying to think about this topic, Women and Fiction, on which she is supposed to give a lecture in a couple of these women's colleges in Cambridge. She thinks about Charles Lamb who wrote about LYCIDAS one hundred years ago and how he had accessed Milton’s manuscript in the library. She thinks perhaps she could make use of some of this inspiration herself and she tries to find her way into the library.

“But here I was actually at the door which leads into the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction.”

This is 1929. And this is what she faces when she is trying to, she or any woman whom she chooses to call as Mary over here, any woman would face if she tries to enter the library, the university library for any academic or intellectual intervention. As per the rule, women can enter only if they are accompanied by a Fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction.

She has neither; and obviously she is denied entry to these hallowed portals, to these spaces which had proved as, which had existed as inspiration to many women writers. This perhaps brings us back to the original point that she was talking about, Women and Friction. It is not entirely about women. It is not entirely about fiction. It is also about the many other conditions which facilitate this process.

And in certain ways it is also about the kind of accesses which spaces allow for women. "That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library. Venerable and calm with all its treasures safe locked within its breast, it sleeps complacently and will, so far as I am concerned, so sleep forever, never will I wake those echoes, never will I ask for that hospitality again. I vowed as I descended the steps in anger." She has been denied access and now she is leaving that space in complete resentment. Then she finds a way to the chapel and decides not to enter. "I have no wish to enter had I the right, and this time the verger might have stopped me, demanding perhaps my baptismal certificate or a letter of introduction from the Dean."

And then she also talks about the memories, the stories of old deans and old dons and she encounters certain a old professor over here. "Before I had summoned up the courage to whistle-- it used to be said that at the sound of a whistle-- old Professor instantly broke into a gallop-- the venerable congregation had gone inside. The outside of the chapel remained." She is thinking of drawing the attention of this old professor whom she encounters over there and she has this very interesting discussion with this old professor and all of this is partly imaginary as well.

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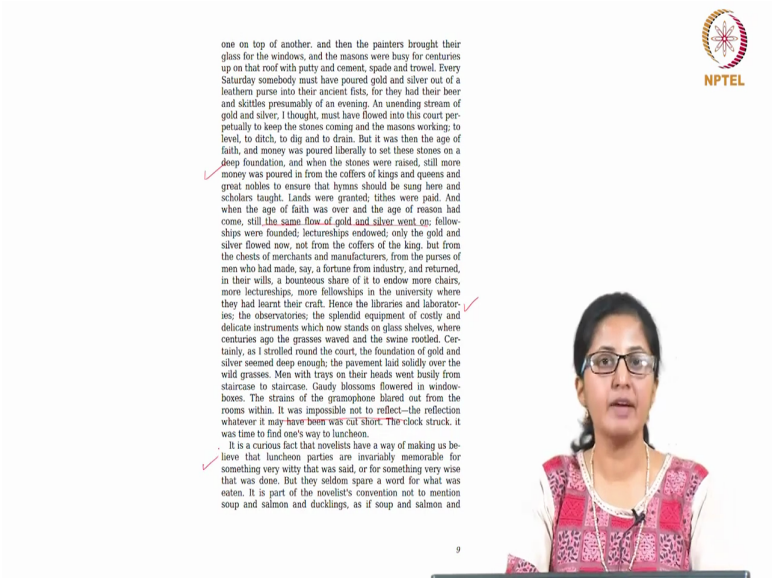

She talks about the money which has been flowing into Oxbridge. “It was then the age of faith and money was poured liberally to set these stones on a deep foundation. And when the stones were raised, still more money was poured in from coffers of kings and queens and great nobles to ensure that hymns should be sung here and scholars taught. Lands were granted; tithes were paid. And when the age of faith was over and the age of reason had come, still the same flow of gold and silver went on.”

So, whether it was a theocratic society or after the coming of the age of enlightenment and the year of rationalism and reason, she finds that money continued to pour into these spaces. And they continued to be very male and very elite. Regardless of what the sociopolitical framework

was, it does not seem to have changed anything as far as a woman like her was concerned, as far as Mary, this imaginary character who is trying to enter the library or the chapel was concerned. “Hence libraries and laboratories; the observatories; the splendid equipment of costly and delicate instruments, which now stands on glass shelves where centuries ago, the grass has waved and the swine rootled. Certainly, as I strolled round the court, the foundation of gold and silver seemed deep enough, the pavement laid solidly over the wild grasses.”

She says, “It was impossible not to reflect-- the reflection whatever it may have been was cut short”. And then it is time for her to find her way to luncheon. Then she has this very curious thought about how “novelists have a way of making us believe that luncheon parties are invariably memorable for something very witty that was said, or something very wise that was done.” She is obviously talking about the many descriptions and the many memoirs and the many fiction that has been written by men, where luncheon parties are described only for the company.”

And then she says, “They seldom spare a word for what was eaten. It is part of the novelist’s convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon ducklings were of no importance whatsoever, as if nobody ever smoked a cigar or drank a glass of wine. Here, however, I shall take the liberty to defy the convention and tell you that the lunch on this occasion began with soles, sunk in deep dish, over which the college cook had spread a counterpane of the whitest cream, save that it was branded here and there with brown spots like the spots on the flanks of a doe.”

This description is very interesting and this is also part of the thought that she is sharing with her audience, with her readers. This is also part of the train of thought, in which she wants her audience and her readers to be partakers. And we find that this description by itself is extremely interesting because she is talking about the kind of fiction that women could have written. That women possibly should have to write, contrary to the many male narratives which are invoked, contrary to the many male narratives within which our narratives and stories are also fraught.

So, whether you take the case of Charles Lamb, who could access the library and then get inspired by the manuscript of LYCIDAS, or whether that is the men who regularly have such luncheons and find company more interesting, the wittiness of it more interesting than the food

itself, Virginia Woolf says that women are always left out of these narratives because they do not have an experiential narration of these events.

They are not participants in this. Things are often told to them and when women figure in over there, they are only written about, they are only narrated. She will very shortly come to that point as well. And her thought goes along these lines reflecting upon the experience that she has over there.

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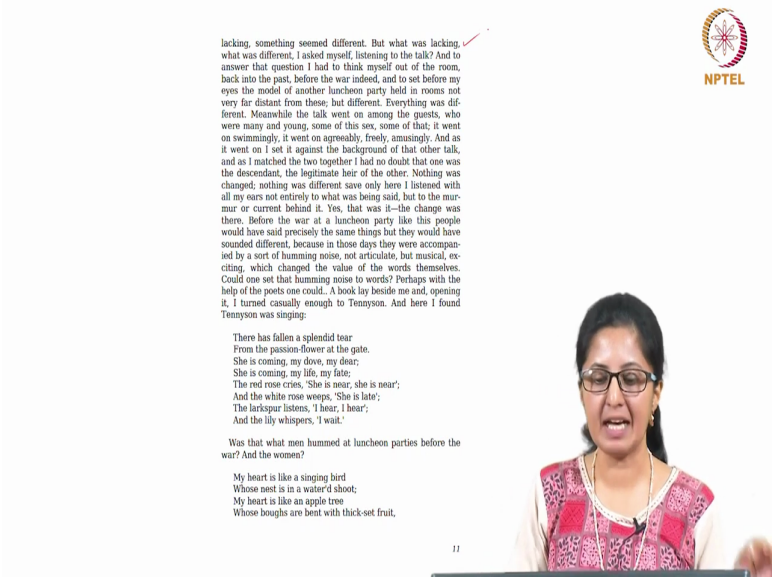

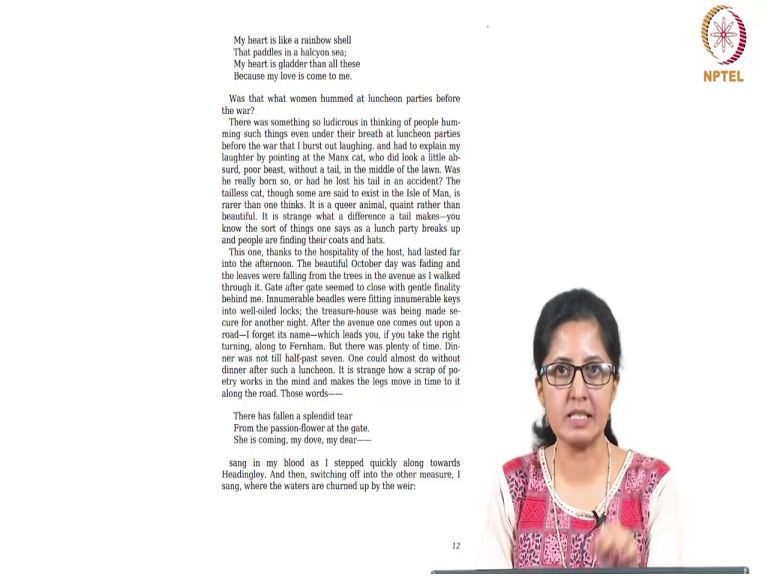

Then she says, “But what was lacking? Something seemed different. What was different, I asked myself listening to the talk and to answer that question, I had to think myself out of that room.” Because that room is clearly not the place where she entirely belongs. Because whether it is Virginia Woolf or Mary Seton or any of the women writers that she mentions at the outset, they all have been left out of those conversations and those spaces. “Back into the past, before the war indeed, and to set before my eyes the model of another luncheon party held in these rooms, not very far distant from these, but different. Everything was different. Meanwhile, the talk went on among the guests who are many and young, some of this sex, some of that. It went on swimmingly, it went on agreeably, freely, amusingly. And as it went on, I set it against the background of the other talk and as I matched the two together, had no doubt that one was the descendant, the legitimate heir of the other. Nothing was changed; nothing was different save only here I listened with all my ears not to entirely what was being said but to the murmur or current behind it.Yes, that was it-- the change was there.”

So, the only change was that she was there, witnessing this conversation, not really being a part of that, but trying to process that in her own terms. And now she is thinking about Tennyson, the kind of thoughts that a poet like Tennyson would have had perhaps.And this is what Tennyson is singing. She says:

There has fallen a splendid tear

From the passion flower at the gate.

She is coming, my dove, my dear;

She is coming my life, my faith;

The red rose cries, ‘She is near, she is near’;

And the white rose weeps, ‘she is late’;

The larkspur listens, ‘I hear, I hear’;

And the lily whispers, ‘I wait’.

And on the contrary, she is trying to also think about what could be the songs, “Was that what men hummed at luncheon parties before the war? And the women?”, she is trying to think about the kind of thoughts that a woman could have had.

My heart is like a singing bird whose nest is in a watered shoot.

My heart is like an apple tree whose boughs are bent with thick set fruit.

She is clearly showing us the difference between the way men write and the way women write; and the kind of thought and the kind of conversations that would be had on an everyday basis.

The everydayness which has been overlooked quite spectacularly well, has been brought back into discussion, is being highlighted over here in this essay of Virginia Woolf. And she is again wondering, “Was that what women hummed at luncheon parties before the war? There was something so ludicrous in thinking of people humming such things even under their breath at luncheon parties before the war that I burst out laughing; and had to explain my laughter by pointing at the Manx cat who did look a little absurd, poor beast, without a tail in the middle of the lawn.” Here she is talking about the unreal way in which fiction had been functioning as far as women’s stories were concerned. She finds it even ludicrous to think about the many things that have been written about women because she finds herself in the middle of certain experiences about which she has read many times and she finds that her belonging in this setting is entirely the same. She has a different tale to tell all together which obviously has not been recorded so far.

This brings us back to her original question about women and fiction, about the conditions which have to be there in the first place in order to help women to write the kind of fiction that they would want to. And now she is contrasting this with the experience that she is about to have at Fernham. So, from Oxbridge, she is moving to Fernham and she is giving a very brilliant contrast between these two experiences.

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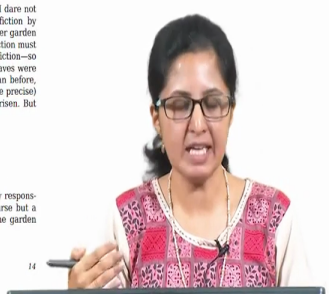
shell-fire. So ugly they looked—German, English, French—so stupid. But lay the blame where one will, on whom one will, the illusion which inspired Tennyson and Christina Rossetti to sing so passionately about the coming of their loves is far rarer now than then. One has only to read, to look, to listen, to remember. But why say 'blame'? Why, if it was an illusion, not praise the catastrophe, whatever it was, that destroyed illusion and put truth in its place? For truth... those dots mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham. Yes indeed, which was truth and which was illusion? I asked myself. What was the truth about these houses, for example, dim and festive now with their red windows in the dusk, but raw and red and squalid, with their sweets and their bootlaces, at nine o'clock in the morning? And the willows and the river and the gardens that run down to the river, vague now with the mist stealing over them, but gold and red in the sunlight—which was the truth, which was the illusion about them? I spare you the twists and turns of my cogitations, for no conclusion was found on the road to Headingley, and I ask You to suppose that I soon found out my mistake about the turning and retraced my steps to Fernham.

As I have said already that it was an October day, I dare not forfeit your respect and imperil the fair name of fiction by changing the season and describing lilacs hanging over garden walls, crocuses, tulips and other flowers of spring. Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction—so we are told. Therefore it was still autumn and the leaves were still yellow and falling, if anything, a little faster than before, because it was now evening (seven twenty-three to be precise) and a breeze (from the south-west to be exact) had risen. But for all that there was something odd at work:

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;
My heart is like an apple tree
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit—

perhaps the words of Christina Rossetti were partly responsible for the folly of the fancy—it was nothing of course but a fancy—that the lilac was shaking its flowers over the garden



walls, and the brimstone butterflies were scudding hither and thither, and the dust of the pollen was in the air. A wind blew, from what quarter I know not, but it lifted the half-grown leaves so that there was a flash of silver grey in the air. It was the time between the lights when colours undergo their intensification and purples and golds burn in window-panes like the beat of an excitable heart; when for some reason the beauty of the world revealed and yet soon to perish (here I pushed into the garden, for, unwisely, the door was left open and no beadles seemed about), the beauty of the world which is so soon to perish, has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder. The gardens of Fernham lay before me in the spring twilight, wild and open, and in the long grass, sprinkled and carelessly flung, were daffodils and bluebells, not orderly perhaps at the best of times, and now wind-blown and waving as they tugged at their roots. The windows of the building, curved like ships' windows among generous waves of red brick, changed from lemon to silver under the flight of the quick spring clouds. Somebody was in a hammock, somebody, but in this light they were phantoms only, half guessed, half seen, raced across the grass—would no one stop her?—and then on the terrace, as if popping out to breathe the air, to glance at the garden, came a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great forehead and her shabby dress—could it be the famous scholar, could it be J—— H—— herself? All was dim, yet intense too, as if the scarf which the dusk had flung over the garden were torn asunder by star or sword—the gash of some terrible reality leaping, as its way is, out of the heart of the spring. For youth——

Here was my soup. Dinner was being served in the great dining-hall. Far from being spring it was in fact an evening in October. Everybody was assembled in the big dining-room. Dinner was ready. Here was the soup. It was a plain gravy soup. There was nothing to stir the fancy in that. One could have seen through the transparent liquid any pattern that there might have been on the plate itself. But there was no pattern. The plate was plain. Next came beef with its attendant greens and potatoes—a homely trinity, suggesting the rumps of cattle in a muddy market, and sprouts curled and yellowed at the edge, and bargaining and cheapening and women with

string bags on Monday morning. There was no reason to complain of human nature's daily food, seeing that the supply was sufficient and coal-miners doubtless were sitting down to less. Prunes and custard followed. And if anyone complains that prunes, even when mitigated by custard, are an uncharitable vegetable (fruit they are not), stringy as a miser's heart and exuding a fluid such as might run in misers' veins who have denied themselves wine and warmth for eighty years and yet not given to the poor, he should reflect that there are people whose charity embraces even the prune. Biscuits and cheese came next, and here the water-jug was liberally passed round, for it is the nature of biscuits to be dry, and these were biscuits to the core. That was all. The meal was over. Everybody scraped their chairs back; the swing-doors swung violently to and fro; soon the hall was emptied of every sign of food and made ready no doubt for breakfast next morning. Down corridors and up staircases the youth of England went banging and singing. And was it for a guest, a stranger (for I had no more right here in Fernham than in Trinity or Somerville or Girton or Newnham or Christchurch), to say, 'The dinner was not good,' or to say (we were now, Mary Seton and I, in her sitting-room), 'Could we not have dined up here alone?' for if I had said anything of the kind I should have been prying and searching into the secret economies of a house which to the stranger wears so fine a front of gaiety and courage. No, one could say nothing of the sort. Indeed, conversation for a moment flagged. The human frame being what it is, heart, body and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will be no doubt in another million years, a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. The lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes. We are all PROBABLY going to heaven, and Vandyck is, we HOPE, to meet us round the next corner—that is the dubious and qualifying state of mind that beef and prunes at the end of the day's work breed between them. Happily my friend, who taught science, had a cupboard where there was a squat bottle and little glasses—(but there should have been sole and partridge to begin with)—so that we were able to draw up to the fire and repair some of the damages of the day's living. In a

minute or so we were slipping freely in and out among all those objects of curiosity and interest which form in the mind in the absence of a particular person, and are naturally to be discussed on coming together again—how somebody has married, another has not; one thinks this, another that; one has improved out of all knowledge, the other most amazingly gone to the bad—with all those speculations upon human nature and the character of the amazing world we live in which spring naturally from such beginnings. While these things were being said, however, I became shamefacedly aware of a current setting in of its own accord and carrying everything forward to an end of its own. One might be talking of Spain or Portugal, of book or racehorse, but the real interest of whatever was said was none of those things, but a scene of masons on a high roof some five centuries ago. Kings and nobles brought treasure in huge sacks and poured it under the earth. This scene was for ever coming alive in my mind and placing itself by another of lean cows and a muddy market and withered greens and the stringy hearts of old men—these two pictures, disjointed and disconnected and nonsensical as they were, were for ever coming together and combating each other and had me entirely at their mercy. The best course, unless the whole talk was to be distorted, was to expose what was in my mind to the air, when with good luck it would fade and crumble like the head of the dead king when they opened the coffin at Windsor. Briefly, then, I told Miss Seton about the masons who had been all those years on the roof of the chapel, and about the kings and queens and nobles bearing sacks of gold and silver on their shoulders, which they shovelled into the earth; and then how the great financial magnates of our own time came and laid cheques and bonds, I suppose, where the others had laid ingots and rough lumps of gold. All that lies beneath the colleges down there, I said; but this college, where we are now sitting, what lies beneath its gallant red brick and the wild unkempt grasses of the garden? What force is behind that plain china off which we dined, and (here it popped out of my mouth before I could stop it) the beef, the custard and the prunes?

Well, said Mary Seton, about the year 1860—Oh, but you know the story, she said, bored, I suppose, by the recital. And she told me—rooms were hired. Committees met. Envelopes

At Fernham she realizes everything is less fancy. We will very quickly go to that section where she talks about food. “Here was my soup. Dinner was being served in the great dining hall. Far from being spring, it was in fact an evening in October. Everybody was assembled in the big dining room. Dinner was ready. Here, was the soup. It was a plain gravy soup. There was nothing to stir the fancy in that.”

So, compared to the very fanciful experience into which she did not really belong, the very fanciful experience that she had at Oxbridge, she finds that at Fernham there is hardly anything fanciful. “The plate was plain. Next came beef with its attendant greens and potatoes, a homely trinity, suggesting the rumps of cattle in a muddy market.” So things are very plain, very ordinary, nothing fanciful at Fernham. And now she is trying to have this very unconventional thought about the money which pours into Fernham.

Compared to the luxury that you find at Oxbridge, she realizes that there is hardly anything in Fernham and she begins to wonder, “This college where we are now sitting, what lies beneath its gallant red brick and the wild unkempt grasses of the garden”. She is wondering about the many meetings, the circulars which are also part of these institutional frameworks. She is also being told and this is also part of the history that she digs up. “And it was only after a long struggle and with the utmost difficulty that they got 30,000 pounds together”. This is in stark contrast to the money, the wealth that continued to pour into Oxbridge before the war, after the war, during the theocracy and after enlightenment. And from the time of its inception, we find that wealth has

always poured into Oxbridge, making it look very fancy, very inviting. But on the other hand, it is only with a lot of struggle that at Fernham they managed to raise even the minimal amount which is needed for their maintenance and subsistence. “At the thought of all these women working year after year and finding it hard to get two thousand pounds together, and as much as they could do to get 30,000 pounds, we burst out in scorn at the reprehensible poverty of our sex. What had our mothers been doing then that they had no wealth to leave us?”

She is pondering about the historical, socio-political, financial, material conditions which had led to this relative poverty at Fernham. And she wonders what were our mothers doing that they did not have enough wealth to leave behind. Why is it that all wealth was concentrated on Oxbridge where the male and the elite went to college? And she comes back to this fictional identity that she had coined at the beginning, Mary.

“Mary’s mother may have been a wastrel in her spare time (she had thirteen children by a minister of the church), but if so her gay and dissipated life had left too few traces of its pleasures on her face. She was a homely body; an old lady in a plaid shawl which was fastened by a large cameo; and she sat in the basket-chair, encouraging a spaniel to look at the camera with the amused yet strained expression of one who is sure that the dog will move directly the bulb is pressed. Now if she had gone into business”, here is again another imaginary contrast which is at work over here.

Mary's mother, she had been busy raising thirteen children and she was the wife of a minister of the church and what could she possibly have done? This time and energy which she had invested into raising thirteen children, by leading a near poor life as the wife of a minister in church, that has not been recorded at all.

We find that there is no way in which money could be generated from that. There is no way in which wealth could be generated from that. She also in certain ways asking us larger questions about this labour wasted, in terms of the time and effort that women had been putting into the domestic chores. Now, she is giving us another rosy picture, another possibility, which is almost imaginary and hypothetical here.

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“Now if she had gone into business; had become a manufacturer of artificial silk or a magnate on the Stock Exchange; if she had left two or three hundred thousand pounds to Fernham, we could have been sitting at our ease tonight and the subject of our talk might have been archaeology, botany, anthropology, physics and nature of the atom, mathematics, astronomy, relativity, geography.”

This is very powerful. Virginia Woolf is trying to tell is that now we cannot talk about these lofty things. We cannot talk about all these fancy things because we are still stuck with the bare minimum of not being able to have enough money, not being able to afford one's own room and space in order to start writing, in order to start articulating.

The contrast that she provides, presence between Oxbridge and Fernham, it begins to assume a greater relevance. It begins to talk about a larger story which has always been swept under the carpet. “Making a fortune and bearing thirteen children-- no human being could stand it. Consider the facts, we said. First, there are nine months before the baby is born. And then the baby is born. Then there are three or four months spent in feeding the baby. And after the baby is fed, there are certainly five years spent in playing with the baby. You cannot, it seems, let children run about the streets.”

She is also talking about the very practical considerations, which would also come in the way of a woman who wants to be a writer, in the way of a woman who wants to be a professional. She is

talking about these many domestic, social conditionings, which are also at work when it comes to the profession of a woman, to the career advancement of a woman.

Given that this was articulated in early twentieth century, 1928-1929, this was a very radical feminist thing to say at that point of time; to draw attention to the immediate social material conditions which also plays a big role in making men or women visible in their respective fields, in their chosen areas of expertise.

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At the end of this first section, she continues to think about money. “I pondered why it was that Mrs Seton had no money to leave us; and what effect poverty has on the mind; and what effect wealth has on the mind; and I thought of the queer gentlemen I had seen that morning with tufts of fur upon their shoulders and I remembered how if one whistled one of them ran; and I thought of the organ booming in the chapel and the shut doors of the library; and I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out.”

This is a woman's experience in Oxbridge as she is narrating it. And she is linking this up to a larger historical problem of women being poor in spite of them contributing much to the family, much to the societies and nations that they are part of, contributing much in terms of child rearing, contributing much in terms of care giving.

She says that there is a certain poverty within which they are historically stuck because of which the many Marys and the many Virginia Woolfs are also denied entry, are also denied these

accesses which come perhaps quite naturally, quite automatically, to the male counterparts. “And I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in; and’ thinking of the safety and prosperity of one sex and the poverty and insecurity of the other; and the effect of tradition or the lack of tradition upon the mind of a writer, I thought at last it was time to roll up the crumpled skin of the day with its arguments and its impressions and its anger and its laughter and cast it into the hedge.”

The pointlessness of it comes home to her towards the end of the first section, the disparity which is at work in institutional ways, which is at work in very spectacular visible ways and the desperateness with which she is faced, that strikes her very hard towards the end of this. “One seemed alone with an inscrutable society. All human beings were laid asleep.” No one seems to be disturbed by this at all except for her and this imaginary character Mary Seton.

“Nobody seemed stirring in the streets of Oxbridge. Even the door of the hotel sprang open at the touch of an invisible hand-- not a boots was sitting up to light me bed, it was so late.” So, she thinks about, she begins talking about women and fiction; and then she shares with us a certain conclusion on which she has already arrived, that one needs money and a room of one's own in order to write.

That is how women and fiction should be talked about. Then she shares her experiences in Oxbridge and the contrasting experience that she has as a woman in Fernham. Then she links it up to poverty and she links it up to how women have been historically unable to send funds for the sake of their daughters and how all these preserves, these universities have ended up as being very male elite preserves.

This is how she ends the first chapter. It is very radical but there is also a certain kind of gloominess that we begin to find towards the end of this first section. In the succeeding sections, we will find that it becomes more and more radical and we find this opening up, this unravelling, this unpacking getting more and more interesting and more challenging as well. So I leave you with this. I encourage you to take a look at the next section before we meet for the next session. I thank you for your attention and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.