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

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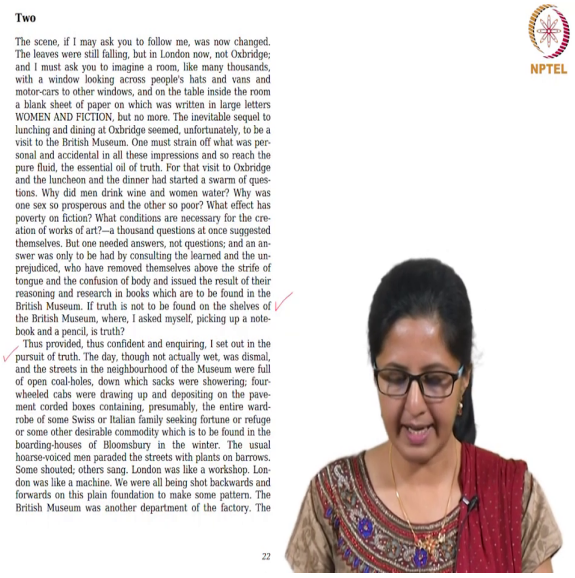

Hello and welcome to yet another session. We are continuing to look at Virginia Woolf's essay, "A Room of One's Own". In the first part, we have seen how she begins to talk about and then eventually write an extended thesis, extended essay about women and fiction; and then she realizes that she needs to focus on the material conditions, on the socio-historical conditions and financial allowances which would help women to write.

And then she also looks at the contrasting images that are presented from Oxbridge, which is largely a male elite university and Fernham, the college which she finds as catering to women. She looks at the historical differences. She looks at the differences in funding and how certain kinds of situations, certain kinds of ambiences are made conducive only for male writers, only for men. And she finds women being excluded from these spaces in physical ways, in financial ways and also in largely historical ways.

And in the second part of this essay, she is paying a visit to the British museum. Let us also think about this fundamental premise where she is experiencing all of these as this imaginary woman whom she chooses to call as Mary or we choose to call her.

And then she is taking herself to the British museum and her experience is not radically different here either. And then, much in alignment with popular beliefs, she is also asking, if

truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British museum, where I asked, myself picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth. So, she wants to know the reality about women and fiction. She hopes to get as much information as possible by going through these various annals of history which are available to her in the British museum. And thus, she says, "I set out in pursuit of truth."

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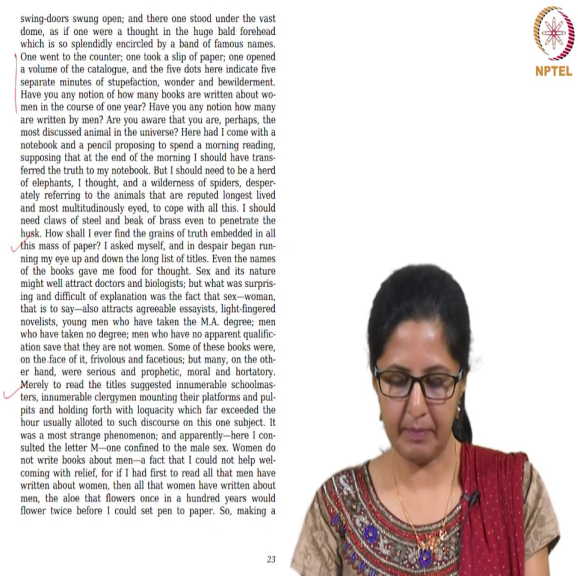

And now this is what she encounters over there: "Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion of how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are perhaps the most discussed animal in the universe? Here had I come with a notebook and pencil proposing to spend a morning reading, supposing that at the end of the morning I should have transferred the truth to my notebook. But I should need to be a herd of elephants, I thought, and a wilderness of spiders, desperately referring to the animals that are reputed longest lived, and most multitudinously eyed, to cope with all this. I should need claws of steel and beak of brass even to penetrate the husk."

So, that is the kind of material that she is encountering, "How shall I ever find the grains of truth embedded in all this mass of paper? Merely to read the titles suggested innumerable schoolmasters, innumerable clergyman, mounting their platforms and pulpits and holding forth with loquacity which far exceeded the hour usually allotted to such a discourse on this one subject. It was the most strange phenomenon and apparently-- here I consulted the letter M--one confined to the male sex, women did not write books about men. A fact that I could

not help welcoming with relief, for I had first to read all that men have written about women and then all women have written about men."

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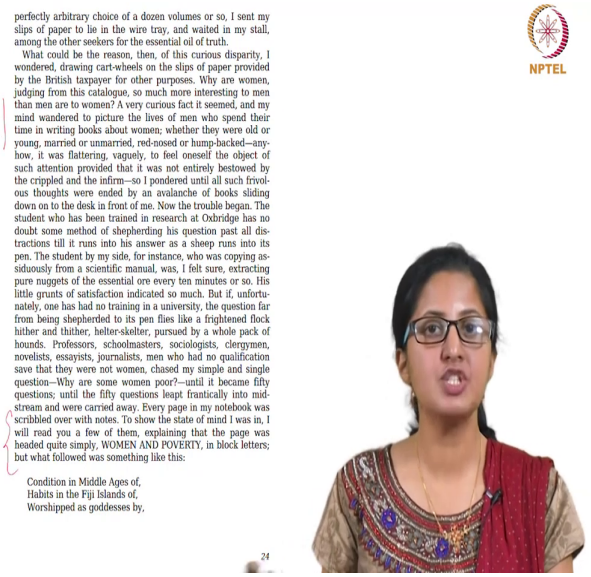

And then she realizes, "Why are women, judging from this catalogue, so much more interesting to men, than men are to women? A very curious fact it seemed, and my mind wanted to picture the lives of men who spend their time writing books about women. Whether they were old or young married or unmarried, red-nosed or hump backed—anyhow, it was flattering vaguely to feel oneself the object of such attention provided." She realizes, initially with a lot of surprise, and later she realizes the dangers inherent within it also. Much of what know, what has been written about women, all of those works have been authored by men.

So, the limitation is there in an inherent way, but that has not been historically visible. And therein lies the danger of such a conclusion and trying to go to a place such as the British museum, from where you hope to find the truth. That is how she puts it. And this truth, about women, has been largely authored by men. How reliable is that truth? How reliable is that data? How reliable is that information which is being circulated as truth? And from this she moves onto the other question about women and poverty.

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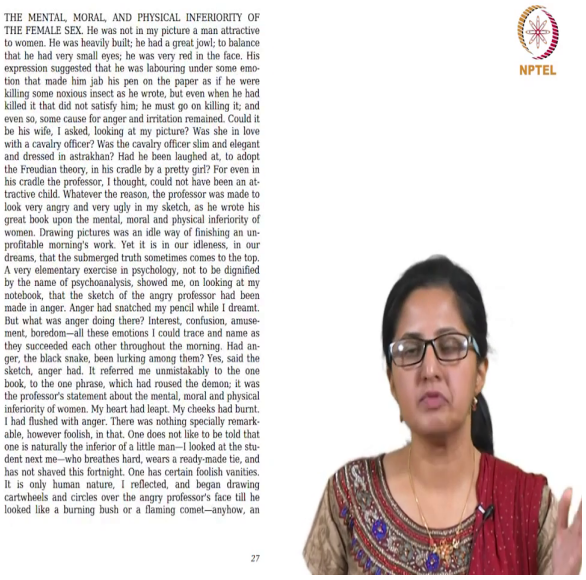

And this connection that she draws upon, the connection between women and fiction, and the connection between women and poverty, that is something which underscores throughout this essay. She continues to look through these various pages and she hopes to find some iota of truth in order to pursue her argument. But she realizes that she needs to find this information from within herself.

It is an experiential journey that she is undertaking, and in this rather long essay, in this rather long articulation, she is also trying to tell the audience that women's experiences cannot perhaps be located from within history, from within the other kinds of knowledge systems that you are familiar with. One perhaps needs to travel along with other women. One needs to experience it differently in order to be able to articulate it, in order to be able to find the truth, whatever that is within such experiences.

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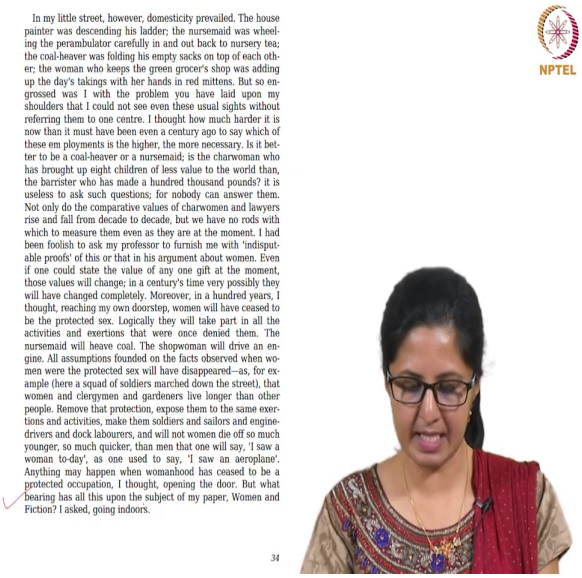

Even towards the end of the second part, we realize that she has not really reached a conclusion. She is still struggling to say the most appropriate thing about women and fiction. The final line says, “But what bearing has all this upon the subject of my paper Women and Fiction?” Also, towards the end of the second part, we realize that she also talks about the various aspects of women's sexuality.

She talks about how domesticated women's feelings have been. And then she begins to wonder, she also begins to realize for herself, and the audience also, perhaps begin to realize along with her, that women and fiction is not a topic which can be dealt within the book, within the pages of a bound book.

It is something which extends outside, and this extension could be either physical, in terms of the many infrastructures, and the many support systems that would facilitate a writer. It could also be very psychological in nature, when you look inward into a woman's life, into the woman’s experience, in order to understand how the topic of women and fiction needs to be approached from different angles, physical, experiential, psychological, economic, historical and of course literary as well.

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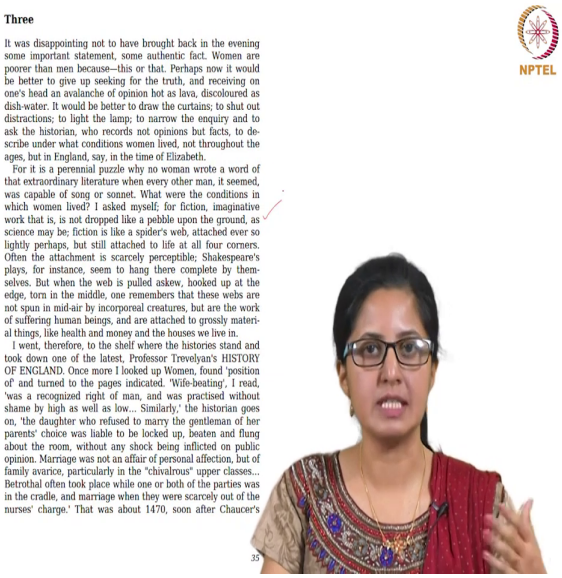

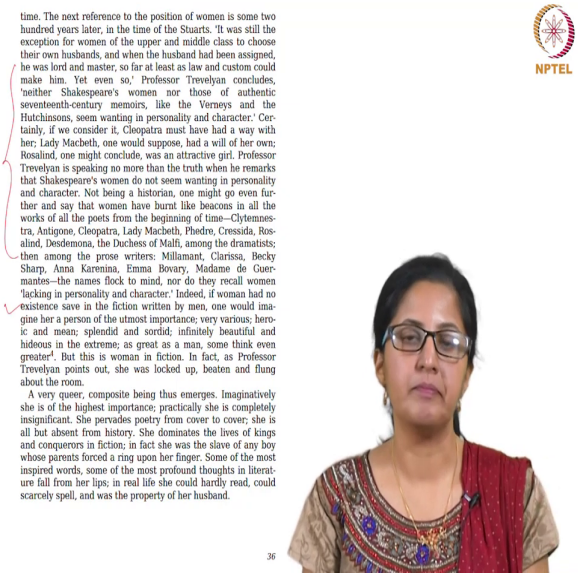

And from this she moves onto the third section, where she begins to wonder about the lives of women within the Elizabethan circumstances. “For it is a perennial puzzle, why no woman wrote a word of this extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet? What were the conditions in which women lived?” She asks this question and she herself is appalled at the lack of historical evidence supporting many of the arguments that she wants to pursue.

“I asked myself; for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.” And she begins to wonder, what is it about the Elizabethan conditions, what is it about the conditions within England that did not allow a genius like Shakespeare to emerge from among the women?

And she talks about these many characters that men have created. Shakespeare has created Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra. Then she talks about not being a historian. Then she talks about Antigone Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Cressida, Rosalind, Desdemona. So, all of these are women characters created by men, but we do not find a woman writer as such emerging in these social conditions. “If woman had no existence save in fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of utmost importance; very various, heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; and as great as a man some think even greater. But this woman is fiction.”

And this something that she quotes from Professor Trevelyan. She realizes that this woman who exists only in fiction, these set of women who exist only in fiction, they were perhaps locked up, beaten and flung about the room. And this is how she begins to talk about the perils of trying to locate a woman within this historical framework. They exist only fictionally. And now we begin to realize the relevance of these many extra-literary concerns being highlighted when Woolf talks about women and fiction.

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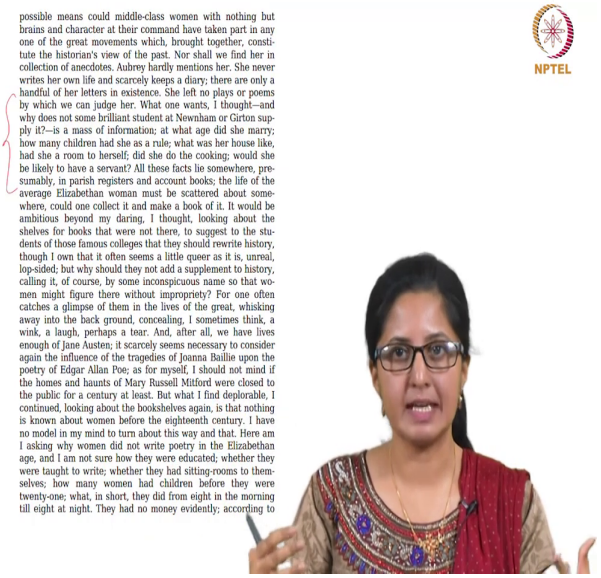

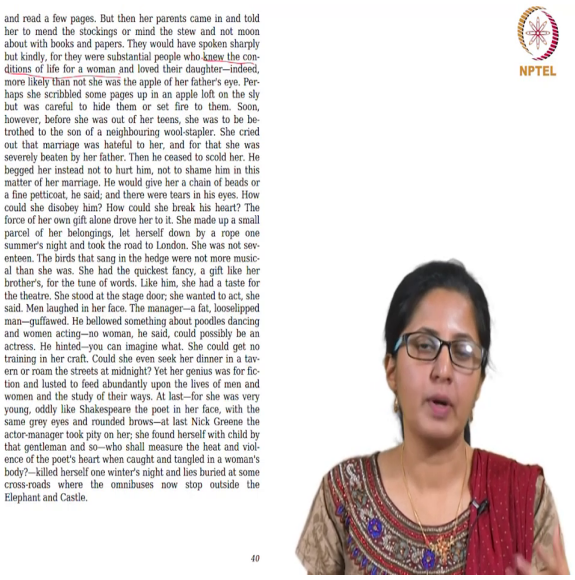

And she also realizes there are very few facts which are available about women. “What one wants, I thought-- and why does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it?” (these are the two colleges where she had given this lecture) “-- is a mass of information. What age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was the house like, had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant? All these facts lie somewhere, presumably in parish registers and account books. The life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it. It would be ambitious beyond my daring.” She of course realizes that too. But she realizes that apart from these fictional accounts which have been largely narrated by men-- and that at best is still fictional too-- she realizes that the real lived experience of women are still scattered in different parts; and it is an ambitious task to collate them and to

present them as authentic experience. She also talks about how impossible now it is to know "what they did from eight in the morning till eight at night."

"They had no money evidently; according to Professor Trevelyan they were married whether they liked it or not before they were out of the nursery at fifteen or sixteen very likely." So, this was the kind of lives that women had been leading and look at the kind of conclusion that she is drawing from it. "Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare." It is as simple as it is illogical. But it is also a certain kind of a conclusion based on which the society had been setting out their rules, based on which women had been forced to lead their lives.

Now we come to one of the most interesting sections in this essay, where she talks about this imaginary sister that Shakespeare could have had. "Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister called Judith, let us say? Shakespeare himself went very probably-- his mother was an heiress to the grammar school where he may have learned Latin – Ovid, Virgil and Horace and the elements of grammar and logic. He was it is well-known a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer and had rather sooner than he should have done to marry a woman in the neighbourhood who bore him a child rather quickly than was right." This is the kind of historical information that we also have about Shakespeare.

"That escapade sent him to seek his fortune in London. He had, it seemed a taste for the theatre. He began by holding horses at the stage door, very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practice his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets and even getting access to the palace of the queen."

Look at the kind of details that we have about Shakespeare. Look at the narrative which has become so popular about Shakespeare. Not really about what he has written, but about the road which took him to this place where he started writing, started performing plays. "Meanwhile, his extraordinary gifted sister", this is again imaginary, let us suppose, "remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was but she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the

stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. They would have spoken sharply but kindly for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter."

This is more important over here, the conditions for a woman. It is regardless of in which family one is being born and brought up, regardless of the kind of conditions that the family could afford or not, it always depends, not on the individual but on the conditions of life for a woman. And the family also we realize are expected to and they eventually end up acting accordingly.

This is perhaps one of the important matters that Virginia Woolf is also trying to pursue through this line of thought. The argument that she is trying to pursue through this line of thought, trying to tell her audience that ultimately it is the social conditions which would make or unmake a writer; and for a woman certain conditions are pre-set. So, unless she breaks out of those set conditions, there is no way in which she could emerge, she could blossom as a writer, even if she had been this mythical sister that Shakespeare himself had. And she also talks about how this imaginary sister Judith, eventually she would be married away and her life would also eventually amount to almost perhaps nothing, and significantly not as famous as her brother would become. And her life also would become just as ordinary like any other lives and it would not be documented.

But look at the kind of attention, historical, literary, cultural and this multifaceted attention that her brother receives on account of just being the male member of the family. Because there are a lot of conditions which work towards his favour quite automatically as well. This is not to undercut the genius that these individual writers possess, but to highlight the material conditions which would not perhaps allow woman of similar gift to access or give herself.

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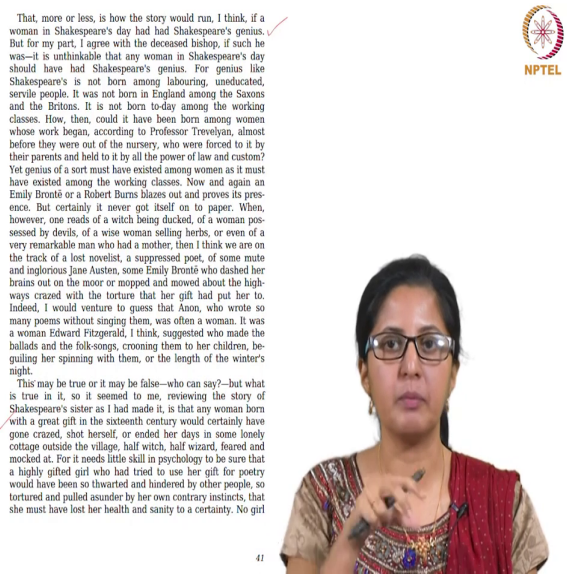
That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius. But for my part, I agree with the deceased bishop, if such he was—it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born to-day among the working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began, according to Professor Trevelyan, almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom? Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes. Now and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without singing them, was often a woman. It was a woman Edward Fitzgerald, I think, suggested who made the ballads and the folk-songs, crooning them to her children, beguiling her spinning with them, or the length of the winter's night.

This may be true or it may be false—who can say?—but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. No girl

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She also talks about some issues related to class, though very briefly. “I think if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius. But for my part, I agree with the deceased bishop, if such he was, it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people.It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born today among the working class. How then could it have been born among women whose work began almost before they went out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom?”

She also talks about the intricacies of gender and class over here, how all of these conditions come together in almost a perfect, neat way; almost to ensure that women do not get to write at all. Then she makes this very compelling argument, “…is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at.”

She is also here referring to the many social customs, many religious customs which had branded women as crazy, as witches, as obnoxious beings, as objectionable beings within the family, within the society. She also says that perhaps these women were the talented ones who could not really break out of these customs and conditions which were pre-set in that in the English society.

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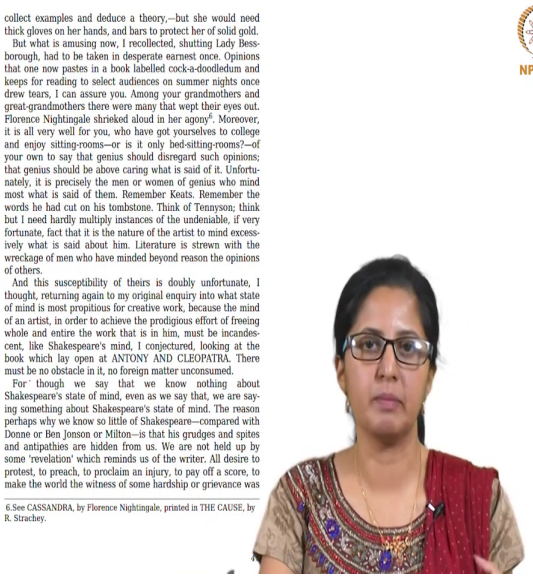

collect examples and deduce a theory,—but she would need thick gloves on her hands, and bars to protect her of solid gold.

But what is amusing now, I recollected, shutting Lady Bessborough, had to be taken in desperate earnest once. Opinions that one now pastes in a book labelled cock-a-doodledum and keeps for reading to select audiences on summer nights once drew tears, I can assure you. Among your grandmothers and great-grandmothers there were many that wept their eyes out. Florence Nightingale shrieked aloud in her agony[6]. Moreover, it is all very well for you, who have got yourselves to college and enjoy sitting-rooms—or is it only bed-sitting-rooms?—of your own to say that genius should disregard such opinions; that genius should be above caring what is said of it. Unfortunately, it is precisely the men or women of genius who mind most what is said of them. Remember Keats. Remember the words he had cut on his tombstone. Think of Tennyson; think but I need hardly multiply instances of the undeniable, if very fortunate, fact that it is the nature of the artist to mind excessively what is said about him. Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded beyond reason the opinions of others.

And this susceptibility of theirs is doubly unfortunate, I thought, returning again to my original enquiry into what state of mind is most propitious for creative work, because the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare's mind, I conjectured, looking at the book which lay open at ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA. There must be no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed.

For though we say that we know nothing about Shakespeare's state of mind, even as we say that, we are saying something about Shakespeare's state of mind. The reason perhaps why we know so little of Shakespeare—compared with Donne or Ben Jonson or Milton—is that his grudges and spites and antipathies are hidden from us. We are not held up by some 'revelation' which reminds us of the writer. All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance was

6.See CASSANDRA, by Florence Nightingale, printed in THE CAUSE, by R. Strachey.

In this entire section, she continues to pursue this line of argument and there are certain repetitions, she reiterates her point. She underscores the belief she has that women cannot write unless the conditions also change. Because women's genius is also dependent on the many ways in which the social conditions and the moral conditions and the financial conditions change to such an extent that they would become more conducive, at a personal level, at the domestic level and also at a larger societal nationalistic level.

She also engages with some bit of literary history here and there to showcase this stark difference between how women writers and how men writers have been treated, how they have been recorded, how their histories have been presented. And also about the many roads that they had to take before they could become a writer, and how those journeys were facilitated more by the existing conditions and how these conditions were inherently hostile to women. So, with this, we again now wrap up for today. We shall look at the remaining sections in tomorrow sessions and also wrap it up. I thank you for listening and thank you for attention. I look forward to seeing you in the next session.