Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own"
(Session 3)
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Hello and welcome. We continue looking at Virginia Woolf's much celebrated essay, "A Room of One's Own". This is considered as one of the essays that laid the foundation of feminist literary tradition and it also had put forward some of the earliest thoughts as far as feminist literary criticism is concerned. So, we begin to realize that she talks about very broad themes such as women and literature and then she moves on to focused themes such as gender. She also looks at various ideas of how class and poverty also influence, class and the social conditions also influence the generation/production of literature.

So, in the first three sections, we saw how Virginia Woolf is taking the readers through this experiential journey of being a woman writer, being a woman, being a woman scholar within a very male centric societal system. She also shows us how in general, the university systems, the universities, the colleges, the libraries, the museums and even the lunch halls are quite hostile to the woman's scholarship. It is not like any kind of a deliberate oppresive kind of a hostility that one comes across. But we realize that there is certain invisibility about the women in general, as far as literature and women are concerned.

In the 3rd chapter which we had taken a look at in the previous session, she also encouraged us to look at the Elizabethan world, the Elizabethan literary world. And she gave us this very

contrasting example about Shakespeare, the brilliant writer, that master dramatist, the imaginary sister that he would have possibly had, Judith Shakespeare, who never really amounted to anything because she did not get the kind of conducive atmosphere in terms of freedom, in terms of moving about, in terms of the agency that Shakespeare had.

So, there is a reason why Woolf chooses to focus on this Elizabethan literary world because it was also considered as the glorious period of English literature, it was considered as a golden period of English literature. And she chose even within such a system, even within such glorious conditions which have been celebrated historically, literarily, we find that there is very little that this world had contributed to women's writings as such. And in Chapter 4, she continues to discuss the Elizabethan world conditions and she tells us how it would have been almost impossible for a woman to write as freely and completely as Shakespeare did because that sort of a world was not available to her, that sort of a world was not available for any woman to inhabit.

She begins this Chapter 4 with such a statement "that one would find any woman in that state of mind in the sixteenth century was obviously impossible. One has only to think of the Elizabethan tombstones with all those children kneeling with clasped hands and the early deaths and to see their houses with dark cramped rooms to realize that no woman could have written poetry then."

She is giving us a different historical perspective of this much celebrated period, the glorious period of English literary production, where women also had to deal with many other things including their children's deaths within their homes-- so social conditions had more adverse effect on them than perhaps on the men. The health conditions, the hygiene conditions, all of that had a severe impact, perhaps the most severe impact on the women than on the men. "What one would expect to find would be, rather later perhaps, some great lady would take advantage of a comparative freedom and comfort to publish something with her name to it and risk being thought of a monster."

So, she gives this example of some of the earliest writers who had the courage to write in the sixteenth century and of course for doing that, for expressing oneself so freely, so completely, as completely as one could, they also risked being labelled as monsters, as witches. And she gives this pertinent example of Lady Winchilsea who was a countess, who was a courtier, who also was one of the well-known poets of those times and this was the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century.

“Here is Lady Winchilsea, for example I thought, taking down her poems. She was born in the year 1661; she was noble both by birth and by marriage; she was childless; she wrote poetry and one has only to open her poetry to find her bursting out in indignation against the position of women.” We find that Virginia Woolf identifies this particular woman, whose maiden name was Anne and she was a countess too, Lady Winchilsea, where she is using her pen to write against the oppression of women. And in certain ways, Woolf finds this quite delimiting as well. But, she thinks it was a very brave move to make in late seventeenth century.

She also finds those themes very delimiting because Woolf believes that when the woman is writing, when a woman is writing against oppression, when this poetry is produced out of this fear, out of these delimiting circumstances, there is only so much one could do with literature.

And had she got a different kind of a background altogether, if she did not have to struggle with this daily oppression and this fear of being a woman and having to come out and write with a lot of struggle then perhaps her poetry would have been purer, more liberating. And another Shakespeare could have perhaps come out of it. Because Shakespeare or for that matter any man when he was writing, never had to struggle with their own identity as a man. But for the woman that perhaps is one of the first steps that she needs to overcome in terms of overcoming this oppression, overcoming this fear which is looming high around them all the time-- within the domestic spaces, within the societal spaces and all the public and private spaces that they have access to.

“On the contrary, it is harassed and distracted with hates and grievances. The human race is split up for her in two parties. Men are the opposing faction, men are hated and feared because they have the power to bar her way to what she wants to, which is to write.

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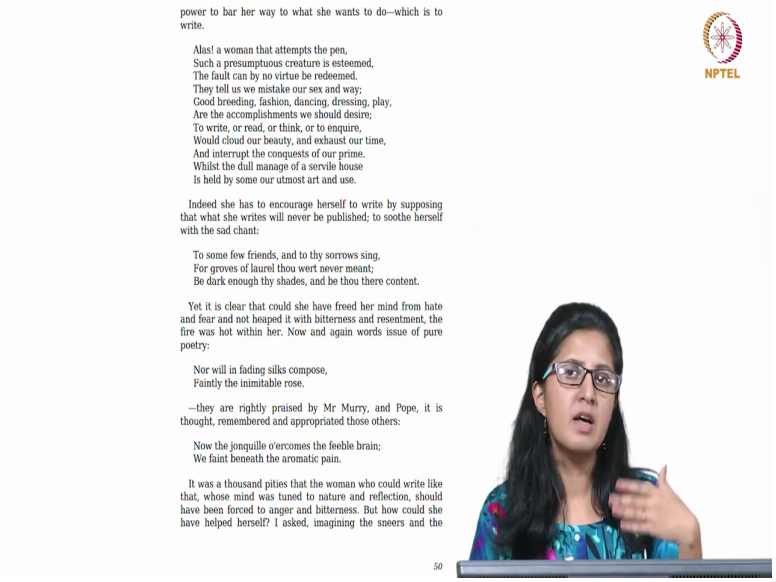

Indeed, she has to encourage herself to write by supposing that what she writes will never be published, to soothe herself with the sad chant. *To some few friends, and to thy sorrows sing."* So, this is another sad thing that Woolf is pointing out. There were many such writers like Lady Winchilsea who had to write with the hope or perhaps with this sorrowful feeling that no one would ever get to see that writing, that was liberating in one sense, but it is also infinitely sad at multiple levels.

And Woolf is more or less convinced "that could she have freed her mind from hate and fear and not heaped with bitterness and resentment, the fire was hot within her."

And perhaps she could have produced purer poetry, more complete poetry, more fuller poetry. “It was a thousand pities that the woman who could write like that, whose mind was tuned to nature and reflection, should have been forced to anger and bitterness. But how could she have helped herself? I asked, imagining the sneers and the laughter, the adulation of the toadies, the scepticism of the professional poet. She must have shut herself up in a room in the country to write and been torn asunder by bitterness and scruple perhaps, though her husband was of the kindest, and their married life perfection.”

This is what a woman who seems to have a near perfect life in terms of marriage, in terms of the noble things that she had in her life--this is the kind of life that such a woman leads. So, what about the others who do not even have this class privilege, who do not even have the luxury to afford these sort of things? So, these women, Woolf realizes, they are constrained as human beings, they are constrained as literary writers and there is not much that they could do in terms of their literary output.

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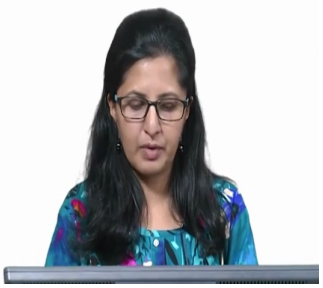
living by her wits. She had to work on equal terms with men. She made, by working very hard, enough to live on. The importance of that fact outweighs anything that she actually wrote, even the splendid 'A Thousand Martyrs I have made', or 'Love in Fantastic Triumph sat', for here begins the freedom of the mind, or rather the possibility that in the course of time the mind will be free to write what it likes. For now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could go to their parents and say, You need not give me an allowance; I can make money by my pen. Of course the answer for many years to come was, Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn! Death would be better! and the door was slammed faster than ever. That profoundly interesting subject, the value that men set upon women's chastity and its effect upon their education, here suggests itself for discussion, and might provide an interesting book if any student at Girton or Newnham cared to go into the matter. Lady Dudley, sitting in diamonds among the midges of a Scottish moor, might serve for frontispiece. Lord Dudley, THE TIMES said when Lady Dudley died the other day, 'a man of cultivated taste and many accomplishments, was benevolent and bountiful, but whimsically despotic. He insisted upon his wife's wearing full dress, even at the remotest shooting-lodge in the Highlands; he loaded her with gorgeous jewels', and so on, 'he gave her everything—always excepting any measure of responsibility'. Then Lord Dudley had a stroke and she nursed him and ruled his estates with supreme competence for ever after. That whimsical despotism was in the nineteenth century too.

But to return. Aphra Behn proved that money could be made by writing at the sacrifice, perhaps, of certain agreeable qualities; and so by degrees writing became not merely a sign of folly and a distracted mind, but was of practical importance. A husband might die, or some disaster overtake the family. Hundreds of women began as the eighteenth century drew on to add to their pin money, or to come to the rescue of their families by making translations or writing the innumerable bad novels which have ceased to be recorded even in text-books, but are to be picked up in the fourpenny boxes in the Charing Cross Road. The extreme activity of mind which showed itself in the later eighteenth century among women—the talking, and the meeting, the writing of essays on Shakespeare, the



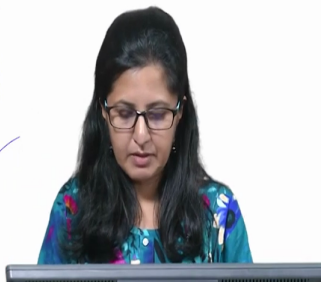
translating of the classics—was founded on the solid fact that women could make money by writing. Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for. It might still be well to sneer at 'blue stockings with an itch for scribbling', but it could not be denied that they could put money in their purses. Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses.

The middle-class woman began to write. For if PRIDE AND PREJUDICE matters, and MIDDLEMARCH and VILLETTE and WUTHERING HEIGHTS matter, then it matters far more than I can prove in an hour's discourse that women generally, and not merely the lonely aristocrat shut up in her country house among her folios and her flatterers, took to writing. Without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue. For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter—the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she—shady and amorous as she was—who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you to-night: Earn five hundred a year by your wits.

Here, then, one had reached the early nineteenth century. And here, for the first time, I found several shelves given up entirely to the works of women. But why, I could not help asking, as I ran my eyes over them, were they, with very few exceptions, all novels? The original impulse was to poetry. The 'supreme head of song' was a poetess. Both in France and in

England the women poets precede the women novelists. Moreover, I thought, looking at the four famous names, what had George Eliot in common with Emily Brontë? Did not Charlotte Brontë fail entirely to understand Jane Austen? Save for the possibly relevant fact that not one of them had a child, four more incongruous characters could not have met together in a room—so much so that it is tempting to invent a meeting and a dialogue between them. Yet by some strange force they were all compelled when they wrote, to write novels. Had it something to do with being born of the middle class, I asked; and with the fact, which Miss Emily Davies a little later was so strikingly to demonstrate, that the middle-class family in the early nineteenth century was possessed only of a single sitting-room between them? If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. And, as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain,—"women never have an half hour... that they can call their own"—she was always interrupted. Still it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required. Jane Austen wrote like that to the end of her days. 'How she was able to effect all this', her nephew writes in his Memoir, 'is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party[7]. Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper. Then, again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed on her; personal relations were always before her eyes. Therefore, when the middle-class woman took to writing, she naturally wrote novels, even though, as seems evident enough, two of the four famous women here named were not by nature novelists. Emily Brontë should have written poetic plays; the overflow of George Eliot's capacious mind should have spread itself when the

7.MEMOIR OF JANE AUSTEN, by her nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh.



Moving along these lines, Virginia Woolf of course realizes that there is a certain silver lining over here. She begins to talk about this restoration writer, Aphra Behn. “And with Mrs. Behn we turn a very important corner of the road. We leave behind, shut up in their parks among their folios, those solitary great ladies who wrote without audience or criticism for their own delight. We come to town, rub shoulders with ordinary people in the streets.”

“Mrs. Behn was a middle-class woman with all the plebeian virtues of humour, vitality and courage; a woman forced by the death of her husband and some unfortunate adventures of her own to make her living by her wits.” First she talks about certain Elizabethan writers, women writers, who had to confine their writing to their own solitariness or to their own limited audience because they do not have the means to bring out that writing. Sometimes they do not have the courage and sometimes they must have thought it really not worth it to risk many things that they hold during their life.

But on the contrary, she is also highlighting the way in which Aphra Behn could produce her writing. Of course, her life is marred by a lot of personal and professional tragedies, but nevertheless she manages to seek a living of her own through her writing. “She had to work on equal terms with men. She made, by working very hard, enough to live on. The importance of that fact outweighs anything that she actually wrote, even the splendid ‘A Thousand Martyrs I have made’ or ‘Love in Fantastic Triumph sat’, for here begins the freedom of the mind.”

This she quotes as an example of more freeier and fuller and complete kind of writing which could perhaps give even Shakespeare a run for his money. And now it is very interesting, the

way Woolf begins to position Aphra Behn's writing. It is not about a personal triumph alone, it is about the kind of triumph which would also in turn influence a certain kind of writing, which would also set standards for a certain kind of tradition which never had existed before.

And here is how she puts it: "For now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could go to their parents and say you need not give me allowance, I can make money by my pen. Of course, the answer for many years was to come was, "Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn!". There is a flipside to it as she notices, because Aphra Behn also had to live her life as a spy. There were many political compromises that she had to make and perhaps and elsewhere Woolf also points out, maybe she had to compromise a bit on the quality of writing as well in order to make money.

But nevertheless here is a possibility, here is a different female tradition that Aphra Behn is putting forward, which would also be encouraging to other young writers who never had another example before them. And this, she thinks, is extremely important because men writers, they always had certain lived examples who went before them, but for the female writer, those kinds of examples were not there at all. Nevertheless, no matter even if Aphra Behn's life was very controversial, she thinks that this is certainly something to look forward to in the light of the sheer absence of such lives at all.

There is of course this flipside, there is of course this counter argument that instead of living a life like Aphra Behn's, death would be better and the door was slammed faster than ever. "That profoundly interesting subject, the value that men set up on women's chastity and its effect upon their education, here suggests itself a discussion and might provide an interesting book, if any student at Girton or Newnham cared to go into that matter." She is also encouraging the students who are listening to her, the young women who are listening to her. If you remember this was originally a lecture delivered to these two women's colleges, Girton and Newnham which were under Cambridge University.

She again comes back to talk about Aphra Behn, a bit more. And this is one of the finest examples that she could give, as far as women, literature and money is concerned; about having one's own autonomy in terms of financial freedom. "But to return, Aphra Behn proved that money could be made by writing at the sacrifice perhaps of certain agreeable qualities. And so, by degrees, writing became not merely a sign of folly and a distracted mind, but was of practical importance." This is extremely important, Aphra Behn making money is not just a personal gesture, it is not something which could be seen as a one-off

instance. But this is something which could clearly make a difference in the lives of many, who would perhaps cease to look at women's writing as a whimsical activity and also focus on its practical importance. Because it is not about a distracted mind, it is about writing, in certain quality, in order to beget money, in order to make a living.

"A husband might die or some disaster overtake the family. Hundreds of women began as the eighteenth century drew on to add to their pin money or to come to the rescue of their families by making translations or writing the innumerable bad novels which have ceased to be recorded even in text books, but are to be picked up in the fourpenny boxes in the Charing Cross Road." This distinction is also extremely important about how women began to make money through translations, by writing cheap novels, by writing bad novels. It really did not matter, it was about making this a profession.

That is what Woolf is highlighting over here. "The extreme activity of mind which showed itself in later eighteenth century among women, the talking, the meeting, the writing of essays on Shakespeare, the translating of the classics was founded on the solid fact that women could make money by writing."

Woolf is clearly showing with historical examples, with empirical examples that when the possibility of making money is made open for women, women began to write as well. So, it is clearly about the professionalism which is at work over here, it is clearly about the pragmatic aspects which are at work over here. It is not about venting out your whimsical mind, it is not about talking about your private concerns, it is about making a living. And this connection is extremely important in order for us to make sense of why this essay is being written in the first place, that there is indeed a connection between women and their autonomy as far as their writing is concerned.

And this turn of events, "Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for.It might still be well to sneer at 'blue stockings with an itch for scribbling', but it could not be denied that they could put money in their purses." She is again and again driving home this point that making money through writing does bring a lot of respectability to women's writing. "Thus towards the end of the eighteenth century, a change came about, which if I were rewriting history", this is Virginia Woolf talking as a feminist literary historian, she is saying if she were to rewrite the history, this is extremely important, "I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses."

This momentous turn in history, which according to Virginia Woolf was perhaps inaugurated by Aphra Behn, about women writing and then making a living out of it, making a profession out of it, this is certainly a historical milestone.

“The middle-class women began to write. For if PRIDE AND PREJUDICE matters and MIDDLEMARCH and VILLETTE and WUTHERING HEIGHTS matter, then it matters far more than I can prove in hour’s discourse that women generally, and not merely the lonely aristocrat shut up in her country house among her folios and her flatterers, took to writing.” There is evidence in the number of women’s writing that came out, especially in, mostly in the form of novels, mostly in the form of long fiction. “Without these forerunners Jane Austen and the Brontes and George Eliot could not have more written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue.”

Here she is alluding to literary history, how in history we find a certain kind of continuity which is at work. What women did not have until a certain point of time was this tradition that they could harp on, that discontinuity that they could take advantage of.

She finds it is from Chaucer onwards, who benefitted much from the forgotten poets. And then after that Marlowe and Shakespeare and all these big male names, they all had benefited from this tradition, which was handed down to them, handed over to them quite effortlessly. And this precisely was a tradition that women did not have access to at all. There was no tradition in the first place for them to take advantage of. So, we find that these women who began to make money out of their writing, through the translation of classics or by writing bad novels, by writing cheap novels, they had paved the way for the Jane Austens and the Brontes and George Eliots who had something to fall back on. And there was a certain kind of tradition, though in very minimalistic ways, being built upon.

“For masterpieces are not single and solitary works. They are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. This is a very modernist thought as well, we find this being echoed in Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” as well-- how the individual poet’s talent has more authenticity when it is laid back against the tradition. Although, here she is talking about a feminist literary tradition. And we find Virginia Woolf paying this stellar tribute to Aphra Behn.

“All women together, ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is most scandalously but rather appropriately in Westminster Abbey. For it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she, shady and amorous as she was,”—It was a very scandalous life that she led, very controversial—“who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight, earn five hundred a year by your wits.” So, this is a message, she is giving out to those women who are listening to her, who are expecting to listen to her, talk about women and fiction-- earn money through your writing. So, it is a very feminist rhetoric, which is at work over here, which is not talking merely about literariness, but it is telling them to earn their living through their writing.

It is a very practical advice that she is giving out to these young women, asking them to earn money, a very pragmatic, a very down-to-earth kind of advice, which is also very radical and very feminist in its rudimentary form. Now, the discussion moves on to the visibility of novels in the nineteenth century. She talks about the early nineteenth century and she is drawing her attention to the number of women writers and also the kind of genre that they are focusing on. “I found several shelves given up entirely for the works of women.” And this is being noticed for the first time. She is taking us through this literary historical journey through writers.

So, the first time that one is able to locate a shelf full of books written by women. But what kind of works are these? “With very few exceptions all are novels. The original impulse was to poetry. The supreme head of song was a poetess. Both in France and in England, the women poets precede the women novelists.” So, what was that historical move? What was that pragmatic condition that led them to move away from poetry and focus more on novels? There was certainly a historical reason, there should be certainly a historical reason to it. We find that here Woolf is also trying to historicize this entire discussion in various ways.

When she is talking about women and fiction, she says that it is not enough. It will not suffice if one would have a very lose discussion on literary forms or in the literariness of the kind of works that one is talking about. One needs to particularly focus on the real historical conditions because pragmatic ways seem to speak louder in terms of feminist critical thought, as we know than any kind of rosy male given definitions about literature. So, coming back to this. “Moreover, I thought of looking at the four famous names, what had George Eliot in common with Emily Bronte? Did not Charlotte Bronte fail entirely to understand Jane Austen?

Say for the possibly relevant fact that not one of them had a child, four more incongruous characters could have met together in a room, so much so that it is tempting to invent a meeting and a dialogue between them." She is trying to historicize as well as fictionalize at the same time. And we find that there is immense power in this method that she is using over here. Woolf also tries to give certain practical answers to some of the questions that she or anyone could have had. So, why did they move from poetry to prose, from poetry to fiction?

"If a woman wrote, she would have had to write in the common sitting room." Here, think about the title of this essay, "A Room of One's Own", it was very less likely that a woman who had to rear children, who had to do her household chores, could have access to a room of her own. Now, she is talking about four women who did not have children, nevertheless, in the middle-class family, in the early nineteenth century setting, she would have had to write in the common sitting room. "And as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain, "Women never have an half hour…that they can call their own." So, it is not really about particular kinds of women but it is more about the social conditions which were dictating terms for them.

"Still it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write a poetry or a play. Less concentration is required. Jane Austen wrote like that to the end of her days. "How she was able to effect all this", her nephew writes it in his memoir, "is surprising for she had no separate study to repair to and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions." So, now we realize that the points that Woolf began to discuss at the outset of this essay were not imaginary at all.

There was a very strong historical foundation to the claims that she was making, that for the woman to write they had to have access to a room of their own. And autonomy was extremely important. A discussion on women and fiction could not have been had unless one also chooses to talk about gender and poverty, class conditions and political conditions, which were also at work, aiding the production or hampering the production of literature. "She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party. Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting paper. Then again, all the literary training that a woman had in the early nineteenth century was training in the observation of character and the analysis of the emotion."

So, to think that all these women wrote within their sitting rooms, amidst all the chaos within the domestic setting, it is exemplary. And she says, What was the training that these women had in comparison to their male counterparts? Did they have the chance to go to a university, to engage in these scholarly discussions, to participate in those long winding luncheons that she spoke about in one of the earlier chapters?

No, “the only literary training that the woman in the nineteenth century had was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting room. That was the only space that she had access to, which was private mostly and public only when visitors came over. So, that was a kind of setting, that was a kind of literary training that these women writers had for themselves. Therefore, people’s feelings were impressed on her.Personal relations were always before her eyes. Therefore, when the middle-class woman took to writing, she naturally wrote novels.” So, if you look at these women, George Eliot, Emily Bronte or Charlotte Bronte or Jane Austen, we find that they all wrote about relationships and its intricacies and they all wrote exemplary novels which were largely about people’s feelings. “Two of the four famous women here named were not by nature novelists. Emily Bronte should have written poetic plays,” but there was no room to write that. Literally, there was no room for her to focus on that kind of writing and produce that kind of writing.

“The overflow of George Eliot’s capacious mind should have spread itself when the creative impulse was spent upon history or biography. They wrote novels; however, one may go even further, I said taking *Pride and Prejudice* from the shelf and say that they wrote good novels.” That ultimately is the point that they wrote good novels. Later on, we will be taking a look at one of these essays by Henry James, “The Art of Fiction”, where he argues that fundamentally, the only point is whether the novel is interesting or not. So, here, even by standards of literary judgement, we find that they wrote good novels and history stands testimony to it.

So, there is this comparison that she tries to make between Jane Austen and Shakespeare, because people always tend to make these sort of comparisons. And she is making a case for the kind of writing that Jane Austen did. “When people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments, and for that reason, we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason, Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, so does Shakespeare.” If Jane Austen

suffered in any way from her circumstances, it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her. It was impossible for a woman to go about alone. She never travelled, she never drove through London in an omni bus or had luncheon in a shop by herself. But perhaps, it was in the nature of Jane Austen, not to want what she had not. Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely. But I doubt whether that was true of Charlotte Bronte, I said, opening *Jane Eyre* and laying it beside *Pride and Prejudice*." So, look at this comparison that she is making over here between *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice.*

And she is trying to understand the character of women who wrote these works and it is a very interesting way of analysing literature, if one may say so.

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imagination and deflecting it from its path. Ignorance, for instance. The portrait of Rochester is drawn in the dark. We feel the influence of fear in it; just as we constantly feel an acidity which is the result of oppression, a buried suffering smouldering beneath her passion, a rancour which contracts those books, splendid as they are, with a spasm of pain.

And since a novel has this correspondence to real life, its values are to some extent those of real life. But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. The whole structure, therefore, of the early nineteenth-century novel was raised, if one was a woman, by a mind which was slightly pulled from the straight, and made to alter its clear vision in deference to external authority. One has only to skim those old forgotten novels and listen to the tone of voice in which they are written to divine that the writer was meeting criticism; she was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. She was admitting that she was 'only a woman', or protesting that she was 'as good as a man'. She met that criticism as her temperament dictated, with docility and diffidence, or with anger and emphasis. It does not matter which it was; she was thinking of something other than the thing itself. Down comes her book upon our heads. There was a flaw in the centre of it. And I thought of all the women's novels that lie scattered, like small pock-marked apples in an orchard, about the second-hand book shops of London. It was the flaw in the centre that had rotted them. She had altered her values in deference to the opinion of others.

But how impossible it must have been for them not to budge either to the right or to the left. What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they

saw it without shrinking. Only Jane Austen did it and Emily Brontë. It is another feather, perhaps the finest, in their caps. They wrote as women write, not as men write. Of all the thousand women who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that. They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like some too-conscientious governess, adjuring them, like Sir Egerton Brydges, to be refined; dragging even into the criticism of poetry criticism of sex;[8] admonishing them, if they would be good and win, as I suppose, some shiny prize, to keep within certain limits which the gentleman in question thinks suitable—'... female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex'.[9] That puts the matter in a nutshell, and when I tell you, rather to your surprise, that this sentence was written not in August 1828 but in August 1928, you will agree, I think, that however delightful it is to us now, it represents a vast body of opinion—I am not going to stir those old pools; I take only what chance has floated to my feet—that was far more vigorous and far more vocal a century ago. It would have needed a very stalwart young woman in 1828 to disregard all those snubs and chidings and promises of prizes. One must have been something of a firebrand to say to oneself, Oh, but they can't buy literature too. Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt, that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.

But whatever effect discouragement and criticism had upon their writing—and I believe that they had a very great effect—that was unimportant compared with the other difficulty

8.[She] has a metaphysical purpose, and that is a dangerous obsession, especially with a woman, for women rarely possess men's healthy love of rhetoric. It is a strange lack in the sex which is in other things more primitive and more materialistic.'—NEW CRITERION, June 1928.

9.'If, like the reporter, you believe that female novelists should only aspire to excellence by courageously acknowledging the limitations of their sex (Jane Austen [has] demonstrated how gracefully this gesture can be accomplished...).'—LIFE AND LETTERS, August 1928.

which faced them (I was still considering those early nineteenth-century novelists) when they came to set their thoughts on paper—that is that they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure. Lamb, Browne, Thackeray, Newman, Sterne, Dickens, De Quincey—whoever it may be—never helped a woman yet, though she may have learnt a few tricks of them and adapted them to her use. The weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully. The ape is too distant to be sedulous. Perhaps the first thing she would find, setting pen to paper, was that there was no common sentence ready for her use. All the great novelists like Thackeray and Dickens and Balzac have written a natural prose, swift but not slovenly, expressive but not precious, taking their own tint without ceasing to be common property. They have based it on the sentence that was current at the time. The sentence that was current at the beginning of the nineteenth century ran something like this perhaps: 'The grandeur of their works was an argument with them, not to stop short, but to proceed. They could have no higher excitement or satisfaction than in the exercise of their art and endless generations of truth and beauty. Success prompts to exertion; and habit facilitates success.' That is a man's sentence; behind it one can see Johnson, Gibbon and the rest. It was a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use. Charlotte Brontë, with all her splendid gift for prose, stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands. George Eliot committed atrocities with it that beggar description. Jane Austen looked at it and laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it. Thus, with less genius for writing than Charlotte Brontë, she got infinitely more said. Indeed, since freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of the art, such a lack of tradition, such a scarcity and inadequacy of tools, must have told enormously upon the writing of women. Moreover, a book is not made of sentences laid end to end, but of sentences built, if an image helps, into arcades or domes. And this shape too has been made by men out of their own

So, she also makes this finer point that in Austen's writing, one does not find this bitterness or rage which we would find in Charlotte Bronte's, *Jane Eyre* perhaps. There is bitterness, there is rage, there is anger. But this is entirely absent in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice.* And both women are marked by real-life lived experiences, but lived the way have different ways in which they respond to these circumstances through their literary writings.

So, now she asks this question, looking at *Jane Eyre* and others, "would the fact of a sex in any way interfere with the integrity of a woman novelist? That integrity which I take to be the backbone of the writer. Now, in the passages I have quoted from *Jane Eyre*, it is clear that anger was tampering with the integrity of Charlotte Bronte as a novelist." So, integrity is extremely important for Woolf when she is trying to analyse literature, it is more important than gender, it is more important than any condition.

"She left her story to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. She remembered that she had been starved of her proper due of experience. She had been made to stagnate in a parsonage mending stocks when she wanted to wander free over the world. Her imagination swerved from indignation and we feel it swerve. But there were many more influences than anger tugging at her imagination and deflecting from its path. Ignorance for instance, the portrait of Rochester is drawn in the dark. We feel the influence of fear in it; just as we constantly feel an acidity which is the result of oppression, a buried suffering smouldering beneath her passion, a rancour which contracts those books, splendid as they are, with a spasm of pain."

It is a very interesting analysis of *Jane Eyre* where she tries to see the author herself in that position and sees that the fear and the bitterness were impediments in the production of pure writing, which also had led Charlotte Bronte to compromise heavily on her integrity perhaps. Nevertheless, there are lot of flaws, there are lot of limitations that Virginia Woolf definitely identifies in them, but she says, "What genius, what integrity it must have required in the face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking?" Only Jane Austen did it and Emily Bronte. It is another feather, perhaps the finest, in their caps. They wrote as women write, not as men write. Of all the thousand women, who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonitions of the entire pedagogue, write this, write that."

So, they were able to write as women, ignoring this entire setting of the patriarchal society, which was always telling them what to do and what not to do, how to write and how not to

write. “They alone were deaf to that persistent voice, the patriarchal voice, now grumbling, now patronizing, now domineering, now grieved, now shocked, now angry, now avuncular, that voice which cannot let women alone, but must be at them, like some too conscientious governess, adjuring them, like Egerton Brydges, to be refined; dragging even into the criticism of poetry, criticism of sex; admonishing them, if they would be good and win, some shiny prize, to keep within certain limits which the gentlemen in question thinks suitable,” so on and so forth. So, this is extremely interesting and we also begin to see how this text is seen as one fine documentary of early feminist criticism. And she comes back to the first part of the essay, where she talks about her experience and tries to contrast it with these stellar examples that one would find in literary history of Jane Austen, of Charlotte Bronte, of the many women who refused to play by the patriarchal rules.

“Oh, but they cannot buy literature too. Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are to turn me of the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like. But there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.” So, that is the point that she is highlighting over here that writing is entirely about freeing your mind. Even if one does not have an access to room of one’s own, even if one had to write the entire set of novels like Jane Austen sitting in her sitting room and writing amidst the chaos of this domesticity, still if one is able to free one’s mind and write with integrity-- and that is what entirely matters-- to write as women write and not to play by the rules set by patriarchal systems.

And finally, in Chapter 4 she is talking about the absence of any great literary tradition, any great female literary tradition and how these women could write in spite of this stark absence. And this is the greatest difficulty she identifies with these women writers “that they had no tradition behind them or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure. Lamb, Browne, Thackeray, Newman, Sterne, Dickens, De Quincey-- whoever it may be-- never helped a woman yet, though she may have learnt a few tricks of them and adapted them to her use. The weight, the pace, the stride of a man’s mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully. The ape is too distant to be sedulous. Perhaps the first thing she would find, setting pen to paper was that there was no common sentence ready for her use. All great novelists like Thackeray, Dickens and Balzac have written natural prose, swift but slovenly, expressive but not precious, taking their own tint without ceasing to be common property.” So, she realizes that these women had written when they had no tradition to back them up, no

tradition for them to follow. And there was hardly anything set or made ready for them and it was pretty much useless, going to the men writers for any kind of help because the genres, the styles, the ambience, nothing was suited to their kind of writing at all.

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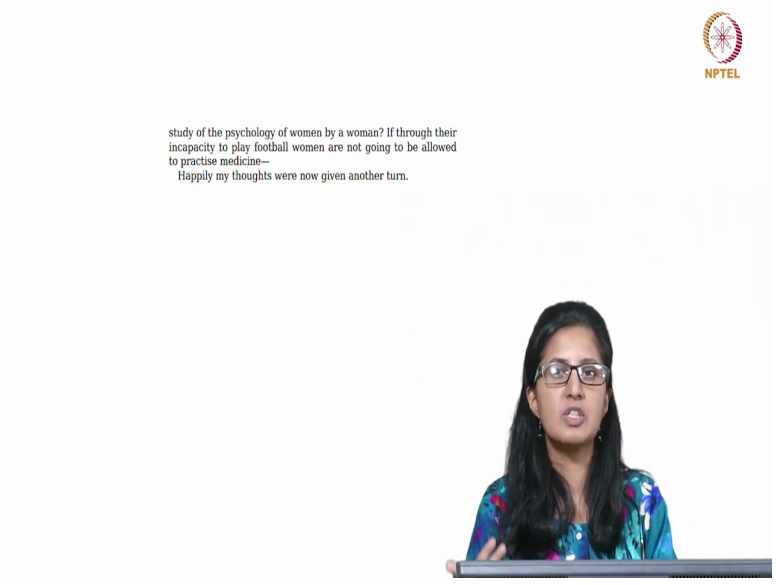

And which is why she argues, perhaps women decided it was best to take to novels as we can find over here. “There is no reason to think that the form of the epic or the poetic plays suit a woman anymore than the sentence suits her, but all the older forms of literature were hardened and set by the time she became a writer. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands another reason.” There was no tradition to intimidate her. That is the reason perhaps why she wrote novels.

“Yet, who shall say that even now the novel, I give it inverted commas to mark my sense of the word’s inadequacy. Who shall say that even this most pliable of all forms is rightly shaped for her use?” So, she is not saying that women writers have really arrived. There are still a lot of challenges ahead. “No doubt, we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs and providing some new vehicle, not entirely in verse, for the poetry in her. For it is the poetry that is still denied outlet. And I went on to ponder, how a woman nowadays would write a poetic tragedy in five acts. Would she use verse?--would she not use prose rather?

She is talking about literary tradition and form and how that also gets solidified within a patriarchal system. And how women perhaps have to find a form which was still young enough, which was still soft and malleable enough for her to shape it according to her needs and her suitabilities. Woolf also agrees these are difficult questions which lie in the twilight of the future. “I must leave them, if only because they stimulate me to wander from my subject into a trackless forests where I shall be lost and very likely, devoured by wild beasts.” So, she leaves it at that and she continues approaching the book case again, “where shall I find that elaborate study of the psychology of women by a woman?”

Of course, she is happy enough to find that there is a lot of fiction, there are lot of novels written by women. And there is a lot of integrity that one could find, even though she gave only two cases over here of Jane Austen and Emily Bronte. Nevertheless, she is very hopeful of finding more. And she is also hoping to turn the lacks into something more historically significant, something more historically significant for the future writers and the future critics to take upon. “If through their incapacity to play football, women are not going to be allowed to practice medicine--. Happily, my thoughts were now given another turn.”

She is now asking certain large historical questions about the structure of this patriarchal system itself, which does not allow women to do certain kinds of things, because of their inadequacies in certain other fields. Like, the example that she gives here, if through their incapacity to play football, women are not going to be allowed to practice medicine. It is like comparing chalk and cheese. And she says, such ridiculous rules have been governing the scholarship and the professional choices that women were allowed to take within these limited societal structures and frameworks. Thus, we realize in Chapter 4 that Woolf has been able to give a proper kind of a framework, the kind of feminist criticism that she is putting forward.

So, in the next chapter, Chapter 5, we shall be looking at how Woolf tries to look at the twentieth century which she is also part of. So, we wrap up for today with this. And in the next session, we shall be looking at Chapter 5 of this essay. Thank you for your attention. And I look forward to seeing you in the next session.