

AN ANALYSIS OF GENDERED LANGUAGE USED ON VIRGINIA WOOLF'S NOVELS



Language and Gender

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the gender language in the novels of Virginia Woolf. At the time Woolf was experimenting with language and also with ideas regarding gender and relationships between the sexes. She is one of the best known feminist writers. She resisted to the gender hierarchy in the society. Her writings are as much real today as it were then. They are reminder of how much women have done and how much must be done yet so as to achieve gender equality. This paper investigates three research questions, such as: What are the origins of Woolf's gendered language?; How is gendered language expressed in her writings?; and Is Woolf's gendered language a product of nature or culture, or eventually both? Five of Woolf's most popular works are elaborated here, such as *Orlando*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *A Room of One's View*, and *The Waves*, and it is shown how her personal life experience influence her works. But first, there is a glance at her life because no exploration of her works will be complete without knowing some of the basic facts about her.

Introduction

Gender plays crucial role in people's lives. From the moment of birth, there are certain rules of behavior to be followed depending on the sex. The norm is that males are the dominant, and females the subservient. They see life only from one point of view, instead as human beings. This is a world with defined gender roles, although there are female writers who tried to look through men's eyes. As Reeves and Baden (2000, p. 9) state,

Across the world, women are treated unequally and less value is placed on their lives because of their gender. Women's different access to power and control of resources is central to this discrimination in all institutional spheres, i.e. the household, community, market, and state.

These gender roles were present in every aspect of society, including education, politics, social life, etc. Women's role was marginalized in each of these aspects. They were undermined and did not have the liberty and satisfaction to enjoy many of the things that man did. One example is women and literature. Women could not write. They could not freely express their opinion or their creativity.

Women's writing is seen from another point of view compared to men's. Even today, female writers have a marginalized position. From ancient time women's writing has been subdued to men's. When the work of a woman could not find its place in the prevalent tradition, it was assessed as superficial, inappropriate or negatively marked as "feminine". Almost all feminist works aspire into the direction of representing female authenticity, of breaking free from the masculine chains and staying true to the feminist identity. If there were not these limitations in women's inferior position which did not allow her to express herself, the feminist literature would

have covered greater area today. But, women writers in the 18th and 19th century found a way of telling their own stories in their own way explicitly expressing their disapproval.

The beginning of the 20th century created a new generation of writers who took a stance against the past for which the generation before them supported. Virginia Woolf was part of this new generation, part of the Modernism in Britain which was a cultural trend in the experimentation in Modernist Literature. Modernist writers seek for novelty making an attempt to break free of the outdated rules of the Victorian age.

Virginia Woolf was an English novelist, essayist, critic, and feminist. She was a prolific writer, whose modernist style changed with each new novel. Her letters and memoirs represent Woolf in the middle of English literary culture in the time of the Bloomsbury period. As T. S. Eliot (May, 1941, p. 431) describes his obituary for her: “Without Virginia Woolf at the center of it, it would have remained formless or marginal...With the death of Virginia Woolf, a whole pattern of culture is broken”.

Literature Review

Ancient history records quite strong female characters, like rulers and warriors who left a mark even in the present. The first written poem was by a woman called Enheduanna. She was a high priestess and the first identified author. She is known for her writing of 42 poems and three length poems which served as prayers. Enheduanna was unique as she identified herself in her writing - which was the first attempt in history to try this. She wrote in first person which acknowledged her position, beauty and power. Her poems were intimate and lyrical; they elevated the goddess, but also gave the real picture of her life, her emotions and her position. This style was very unique for that time period (History Hero, 2016).

Cohick states that the Greco-Roman world based the role of the woman according to the management of her household. Women here were not isolated at home, instead their shops where they worked or the fields were close to their homes. Their work was highly valued because they contributed to the survival of the family. While wealthy women were educated to read, write and learn philosophy. They were not expected to be orators or to take up important roles in the active political life, but also they were very influential. Poorer women tended to work in the fields, but also managed estates and shops (Cohicj, n.d.). They stayed out of the political life and did not have the right to vote.

In the Celtic culture, women had the liberty and rights they enjoyed. Their position in the society was appraised. As opposite of other cultures in that time, they were protected under the law. It is remarkably how Celtic women served as rulers and warriors, and were trained how to fight equally as boys. Boudicca was the best known woman of this kind. They were not excluded from the public life and had various important roles, like diplomats, ambassadors, businesswomen, etc. They were free to choose their husbands. The marriage was based on the freedom of man and woman and its dissolution was rather very easy.

Showalter (1977, p.378) demonstrates how women's literature has evolved. She divides the movement into three stages starting with the Feminine, a period beginning with the use of male pseudonym in the 1840s until 1880 with George Eliot's death; the Feminist, from 1880 until the winning of the vote in 1920; and the Female, from 1920 until present day, including a new stage of self-awareness about 1960. The Feminine phase includes writers, like Brontes, Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, etc. They made an attempt to incorporate themselves into the men's world, and one can notice a note of conflict and resistance in their novels. In the Victorian period women compromised the reading fella of men's books as women writers were limited. In the following stage, the minority escapes the traditional values demanding for the recognition of their rights. In this phase, literature was perplexed as there was a protest note from women. Some borrowed their voice to protest against marriage and economic oppression. Others, such as Sarah Grand, George Egerton, etc. confined themselves to fiction and took a wrong turn demanding social and political changes granting women more equal rights as men. Their works were more pieces of transferring a message, than of art, which had opened the window for the research of feminist theory, identity and aesthetic. The third phase is symbolized by self-discovery and gaining freedom. Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf were tracing their way to female aesthetic giving rise to sexuality. The female experience carried certain dose of mystery, vulnerability and drive to self-exploration. The period is concerned with discovering sexuality and avoiding bodily contact.

The Victorian Era was the period when England made its step towards change and development as a dominant worldwide power. People were producing great number of novels, stories and poems. The common Victorian novel represented the real life, more notably the social life at the time, and the main characters were a representation of man and women from the real life, which is a feature of the Victorian society. This poetry used imagery and the senses as representing the struggle between nature and romance. Sentimentality was also one of the ideas of Victorian poets writing tender and passionate poems. This period is filled with stories of heroic and chivalrous knights. It is the link between the Romantic Movement and the Modernist Movement.

Research Design and Methodology

This study is a mix of quantitative and qualitative methodology. The paper starts with a general view on gender and literature and continues with the elaboration of Woolf's works, such as *Orlando*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *The Waves*. Then a questionnaire was handed to university students where they answered the questions. The quantitative research provided data in a numerical form which were used to construct tables of raw data. The qualitative research gave in-depth information of the subject studied.

Conclusion

The eternal question of what is the relation of literature with reality cannot be separated, not mutually conditioned. The collection of intimate feelings, emotions and projections of the writer who communicates with her works are not permanent, and change the work and the writer. Therefore, there is no a constant category which will circle or define the originality of the work as a subject of history, sociology, economy. All of Woolf's novels are an expression of female identity. Their authentic identity remains remarkable in both literature and in certain philosophical ideas. Even her own death, or suicide, which was somehow reasonable to her, carries a logical cultural mark since she died as a feminist. The stones in her pockets is a perfect trick for the weak body to be drowned fast and for good. But, the stones carry a text, a text on women, on cultural anthropology. This unusual metaphor not only embodies Woolf's written word, but it accentuates her attitude towards death, in which death is an inseparable part of life. The stones are dead, but firm creation; it survives and outbraves time. Death and life in the stone are one, but to her they were units. Her understanding of death is somehow a symbolic transfer into the other gender, the male gender, which represents death. Anyway, she made more than courageous decision; when she realized that she had enough of discovering her own identity, she left this world, and her story found the perfect moment for an end, or maybe just a new beginning. Even in these modern times Virginia would not be too far from the truth. Her master-pieces and her uniqueness are ground of the feminism and of new ways of expression.

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