

Virginia Woolf's Representation of Women: A Feminist Reading of "The Legacy"

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Received: October 4, 2016 Accepted: February 25, 2017 Online Published: February 28, 2017

doi:10.5539/ells.v7n1p120 URL: <http://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v7n1p120>

Abstract

Over the centuries women have been struggling to gain recognition, calling their independent voice to be heard in patriarchal and racist societies. As they follow the standards and the values of their societies, women tend to break the stereotypical and submissive images that degrade their position in their societies. Thus, this paper will scrutinize thoroughly women's intellectual ability from a Gynocriticism perspective taking Virginia Woolf's short story "The Legacy" (published posthously in 1944) as an example. The present paper provides an analytical view of the four models of gynocriticism; i.e., biological, linguistic, cultural, and psychological. It also attempts to shed light on some common feminist themes such as the theme of marriage and how oppressed marriage motivates male dominance. The paper addresses the relationship between wife and husband in terms of gender inequality and women's identity. It also tackles women's trapped position as distinct from the liberty of men and oppressed by husband in an unhappy marriage. It relies heavily not only on feminist perspectives as gynocriticism, gender inequality, and the theme of marriage; but also on the authors' personal life. The paper concludes that being unable to speak their voice freely, women view writing as their salvation for their voice to be heard.

Keywords: gynocriticism, Virginia Woolf, "The Legacy", gender, feminism

1. Introduction

The first half of the twentieth century endures and sustains numerous revolutions such as social, cultural and sexual revolutions. It also testifies revolutionary and radical changes in all fields of life-bringing distinct changes over humanity. Women, in this transitional period, were influenced by these changes and started claiming their intellectual thinking. Such a reaction corresponded with the appearance of feminist theories that tend to reject the stereotypical notions in treating women as an "imperfect man". In fact, feminist theories deny what used to be thought of a female as Aristotle declares. For Aristotle, "the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, p. 121). Therefore, feminist theories are all about respecting women seriously in setting their own identities as men.

Feminism is a series of political, social, and cultural movements that aims at denying and rejecting the supremacy and gender inequality. Though the word feminism did not enter the English language until 1890, this movement can be traced back to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792). It has sought to disturb the patriarchal culture, to seek independence, recognition and education. Feminism comes as a result of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism that bring women under oppression and inequality. "It is concerned with the refusal and denial of the masculine notion of the authority or truth as well as the rejection of the patriarchal culture and its dominance over matriarchal one in all spheres of life" (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997, p. 115). Therefore, feminism eliminates any discrimination against women giving them the right to express themselves freely rather than being an object for sexual exploitation.

2. Method

This paper aims at unmasking the cultural, social, and gender manifestations of feminist criticism in Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy" depending on Woolf's representation of women, Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism which was introduced in her seminal book *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979), and the theme of

marriage. It is conducted by examining gynocriticism's four models, namely biological, linguistic, psychological, and cultural. Besides the concept of gynocriticism, this paper also focuses on the theme of marriage in the story. It sheds light on the treatment of married woman as marginalized, oppressed, and submissive wife within unhappy marriage. This paper highlights the voice of a woman in a patriarchal society within the frame of feminism criticism.

3. Results

Women in the examined story suffer from stereotypical and submissive images that degrade their position in their society. "The Legacy" represents, not only the personal struggle of the protagonist, but also the collective one through which the two protagonists stand for women in the world. The researches argue that, through the "The Legacy", Woolf advocates women's rights and freedom, especially the married ones. They argue that Woolf looks for ensuring women's rights in speaking, thinking, and having their own identities, names, and emotions. In her depiction of married women, Woolf rejects the misrepresentation of women as "the Angel of the house" and replaces it with the rebellious woman who calls for an equal treatment inside and outside home. She demands women's anger and revolution against male's hegemony in the house, society, and everywhere through writing.

4. Discussion

Critics have already known through the notion of Culler (1983) that feminism is an act of reading as a woman. On the other hand, Yoder (1987) said that a feminist literary criticism does not mean to criticize women themselves, or be a woman critic, or even criticize a woman writer. Rather, it is about viewing the literary works with particular awareness, and about the existing correlation between the notion of gender and that of culture, literature, and life. Thus, gender is not the only factor that influences feminist literary works. Other factors can make differences such as the author, the reader, the character, society, culture, and religion all of which influence the writing process.

According to Bressler (1998), the aim of feminist criticism is to change the degrading view of women so that all women will realize that they are not a "significant other" but each woman has her own identity, and her important role in the society. Bressler states that "[a]s a social movement, feminist criticism highlights the various ways women, in particular, have been oppressed, suppressed, and repressed. It asks new questions of old texts. It develops and uncovers a female tradition in writing. It analyzes women writers and their words from female perspectives" (Bressler, 1998, p. 185).

Feminism theory is divided into three waves. The first wave appeared in the 19th century and early 20th century. It calls for women's rights and women's suffrage seeking women's right to vote and to have their distinctive tradition of writing. The second wave emerged in the 1960s. It basically calls for women's equality and liberation. It emphasizes women's experience outside home and sexual difference. The third wave began in the early 1990s. It continued to fulfill what the second phase asked for.

Virginia Woolf is the founder of the first wave of feminism. She announced many issues that later feminist critics focused on. Woolf's creative writing as a woman was produced in two texts which were fundamental contributions to feminist's theory, namely, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). In these works, she highlights women's disadvantages compared to men. In fact, Woolf in *A Room of One's Owns* asserts women's rights in exploring their female experience in writing without comparing their experience in reaction to men's. Here she advocates women's literary production. Similarly, Woolf's essays were in favor of a distinguished tradition of women's writing.

The most important aspect of feminism that can be applied to "The Legacy" appears in the first wave. Written in 1940s, the story is told in the third person. Angela is the protagonist and round character. She is having an affair because she was not happy with her husband. Her husband, Gilbert Clandon is so busy that he does not spend time with her. Angela's marriage is unhappy. She has an affair with B.M. whom she loves and feels happy with. With B.M, Angela expresses herself and spends time together. It is only through her diaries, her legacy, that Gilbert knows about her true needs, her way of thinking, and her secret affair. At the end of the story, we learn that B.M. commits suicide because Angela does not divorce her husband. Shortly after B.M. commits suicide, Angela also commits suicide. In her legacy, Angela writes that she is proud of being Gilbert's wife and she describes how handsome Gilbert is, but she hates and deceives Gilbert.

In her story, Woolf recognizes gender identity as a socially constructed identity that can be challenged. Angela does not accept the fact that she has to rely on her husband. She seeks her own social, economic and educational independence. She challenges the obstacles of being a female in a patriarchal society and rejects the notion of the

domestic and docile wife as the “angle of the house”. In fact, she seizes every chance and “pluck(s) the courage and talks to Gilbert, [her husband],” (p. 637) about her dream in having her own job. She takes the idea of having her own job and helping others “very seriously” (p. 637).

However, Gilbert ridicules and taunts her saying that she had “enough to do looking after him, after her home” (p. 637). She attempts to go beyond the stereotypical images that prevent women from liberating themselves. Angela is conscious of the restrictions that deprive her from fulfilling her dream despite her husband’s wealth. She takes actions and decides to have her own intellectual life with B.M. She moves away from the standards of the society where she establishes her own identity in reading revolutionary books as Karl Marx’s *The Coming Revaluation*.

It is apparent that Woolf tries in this short story to achieve “a balance between male self-realization and female-annihilation” (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 127). In other words, she denies the conflict between male and female identities. In the story, Angela associates her life with B.M and calls for a revolutionary action that is similar to the way B.M anticipates a revolution: “revolution is bound to come... we live in a fool’s paradise” (p. 637). Angela’s revolutionary actions are not only limited to her secret affair with B.M, but they are also implied in determining her destiny in Killing herself.

Angela has the courage to refuse male dominance and to set her final destination. She does not depend on her husband to direct her as a doll or a trophy in his hands. She moves beyond Gilbert’s expectation who wonders how his wife “had left everything in such order—a little gift of some sort for everyone of her friends... as if she had foreseen her death” (p. 635). In doing so, Woolf doubts the world of men. She questions the reliability of men’s world versus women’s world. In the story, Gilbert speaks out of his world. He claims, at the beginning of the story, that his wife looks “healthy”. His blindness to see his wife’s despair shows his self-centered character since he sees things from his own perspective only. He cannot determine the true needs of his wife till he reads her diaries.

Through Angela’s diaries, Woolf asserts and shows a great awareness of the distinctions of women’s writings despite men’s discriminations. In fact, Moi outlines in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader* (1987) Woolf’s aim in creating a complete and finished “displacement” rather than a “balance” between masculine and feminine types. In doing so, Woolf ensures women fixed identities regardless of the patriarchal society in which the head of the family exercises authority.

Woolf sees women’s achievements not only in taking care of their families, but also in holding great titles and continuing their education. Angela proves her eagerness to intellectualize herself regardless of Gilbert’s mockery of “the insignificant, happy, daily trifles that had made up [his wife’s] life” (p. 637). He keeps ridiculing his wife’s ability in learning and writing her own diaries, calling her a “child” (p. 636). Even after her death, he disparagingly taunts his wife’s writings and mocks her “schoolgirl hand” (p. 636). He advocates a male-dominated society in which only men stand for the Parliament and women are there to provide “the greatest help to [men] in [their] careers” (p. 635).

Influenced by Woolf’s writing, Elaine Showalter shows a continuation of literary history of women writers. Showalter (1977) outlines the independency of women’s ideological, psychological, and material determinants. She classifies and concentrates exclusively on literature written by female authors. She introduces the term gynocriticism that is concerned with women writers rather than readers. She Promotes women’s experience in writing and examines it profoundly. She also emphasizes the difference in women’s writing as compared to men’s experience in writing despite men’s dereliction of women’s writing. Such differences are highlighted by the biological, linguistic, psychological, and cultural models that the term gynocriticism referred to.

Feminist literature throughout time has been written by men. They examine the way that the female consciousness is depicted by male writers. However, Gynocriticism opens argue that women’s writing expresses a distinctive female consciousness, which is more discursive than its man counterpart. One concern of gynocriticism is to identify what are taken to be the distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women—the world of domesticity, for example, wife–husband relation, mother–daughter, giving birth, and woman–woman relation.

Gynocriticism is a criticism which concerns itself with developing a specifically female framework for dealing with works written by women, in all aspects of their production, motivation, analysis, and interpretation. The concept of gynocriticism is introduced in Showalter’s book *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979) for an appropriate form of feminist criticism, namely the type which is concerned with woman as writer, with woman as producer of textual meaning, and with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women.

In her book, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Elaine Showalter offers four models for critics of literature written by women: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical, and cultural. Biological model explores how women body is depicted or imprinted on the text. The linguistic model focuses on the language and how men and women use it in different ways. In addition, the psychoanalytical model analyzes the female mind and the way woman's mind affects writing. Finally, the cultural model looks at how the surrounding society influences women's writing. It is also concerned with how women's stereotypical image has been shaped by her society and related to the text.

Biologically, Woolf, in "The Legacy", describes woman's body and clothes. She describes Gilbert's silliness in thinking of other women despite the death of wife. He cannot imagine a world where men need the help of women. He mocks the idea of Sissy Millers offering help to him: "if at any time, there's anything I can do to help you, remember, I shall feel it, for your wife's sake, a pleasure" (p. 336). His arrogance propels him to believe that Sissy Millers has some passion for him and needs him because he is not only a "very distinguished-looking man," but also a man of wealth and high position. In fact, Gilbert's arrogant attitude is what Woolf tends to criticize. His attitude deprives him of his sight since he views his wife only as an object for sexual exploitation. Thus, Woolf establishes another side of Angela where she has the potential to read books.

Moreover, Woolf depicts the clothes of Sissy Miller when she arrived at Gilbert's behest, and Gilbert's finds her terribly distressed. He gives her the pearl brooch as a gift from his wife, Angela. The writer uses the voice of a man to desire woman's clothes. Gilbert says that "other clothes upon which a pearl brooch would not look quite so incongruous" (p. 636). Gilbert seems to forget his wife's death and starts to entertain a passion for Sissy Miller. Sissy Miller notices how Gilbert "for the first time was struck by the expression, sympathetic yet searching, in her eyes" (p. 636). He is shallow since he does not believe of the intellectual power of women. He accuses his wife without any hesitations of having an affair with B.M. He judges his wife in terms of a sexual relationship without thinking of her other needs. Thus, he constructs things from his point of view only since the voice of his wife is silenced due to her death.

The cultural model investigates how the society in which female authors work and function shapes women's goals, responses, and point of view. Moreover, it looks at how the surrounding culture influences women's writings and how women's image or stereotype shaped by her society is reflected in their texts. In her book *Virginia Woolf Icon (Women in Culture and Society)* (2000), Silver analyzes Virginia Woolf's surprising visibility in both high and popular culture, showing how her image and authority have been claimed or challenged in debates about art, politics, anger, sexuality, gender, class, the Canon, feminism, race, and fashion. Silver illustrates how Virginia Woolf has become the site of conflicts about cultural boundaries and legitimacy that continue to rage today.

"The Legacy" depicts the status of English woman, the protagonist, Angela, represents a British woman who has lived in the Victorian era. This era has witnessed several changes in the social, economic, political and cultural aspects. The general image of a woman in this era is that she is inferior to men socially, mentally, and physically.

El-Kathib (1999) indicates another image of women, the image of the "perfect lady", that is the idle Victorian woman. This perfect lady was an ideal woman whose house is full of secants and ignorant that rarely read or got involved in any serious discussion of any issue. In "The Legacy", Angela's husband, Mr. Gilbert, treats her as a child or a doll. Woolf says that "He smiled—she was still such a child" this emphasized the minor role of woman in this era. More importantly, Angela's ignorance is one of the things that charm her husband, saying: "she was ignorant" and "she used to say, as if that she were not one of her charms". On the other hand, Gilbert resists his wife's learning and rejects her intellectual thinking as the majority of men in the Victorian era do.

In terms of the linguistic model, Mills (1995) praises Woolf's assertion of female writers' sentence. Female writers develop what she terms the "female sentence" or the "sentence of the feminine gender". Mills proceeds to elaborate Woolf's position as follows:

For Woolf, certain women writers crafted a new type of sentence which is looser and more accretive than the male sentence. This view... seems to be echoed in the most recent statements by French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous... Both Woolf and some French feminists assert that there is a difference between men's and women's writing. (p. 44)

Woolf employs her narrative techniques to demonstrate character's thoughts, feelings, and emotion. Though the story is written by a female writer, it is narrated by a male narrator, Gilbert. Woolf liberates her voice in a male narrator. She creates her sub-identity in the story through which she disguises her voice.

Unable to speak her thoughts frankly, Woolf demonstrates a narrative technique through which a man narrates

the silenced voice of his wife. In doing so, Woolf preserves the norms and establishes her story from a male's perspective which gives a voice to the silenced Angela through reading her diaries. Consequently, Woolf would not be accused of violating the natural norms of the society in letting a female narrates her own story from her perspective. In other words, Gilbert is the one who dominates the discourse.

As for the psychoanalytical model, Woolf represents women's experience. She asserts women's writing and documenting their own experiences. In fact, in her semi-fictional critical work, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf declares how women develop their artistic talent if they achieve their own economic and social life because they will be equal to men. Though she was surrounded by an educated family, she did not have the same education that her brothers had. Unlike her brothers, she was taught no Greek.

Such discrimination is viewed in "The Legacy" depending on the psychoanalytical model of gynocriticism. Woolf depicts the way Angela is deprived of her education and fulfilling her eagerness in learning since she depends on her husband. Woolf gives Angela the choice to kill herself and to put an end to her depressed and submissive life. Moreover, there is a gap in terms of communication between Gilbert and Angela. This gap affects her writings where even her diaries include some blank pages, preventing her from expressing her mind freely. Furthermore, Woolf depicts the role of the woman in her marriage. In the story, the protagonist resists the traditional roles of the wife. We never see Angela, the wife, engaged in any emotional and sexual relationships with her husband in the recalled memories throughout the story. She always keeps distance between her and him to gain her independence and individuality. Woolf's choice of marriage as a major theme is vital in her literary works. However, this theme shows society's impact on women writers and how female writers write themselves and reflect their society.

Woolf rejects the representation of women only as wives, housekeepers, and mothers. In "The Legacy", Angela has a traditional, emotionless, and an oppressed marriage. Woolf attacks this kind of marriage because it is devastating for women who spend their lives taking care of their husbands and children, overwhelmed by domestic duties, sympathizing and scarifying their lives for the sake of their husbands' happiness. (Wellakawd & Warren, 1973)

In her feminist article "Professions for women" (1931), Woolf talks about the necessity of killing the notion of "Angel in the House". Thus, women can live freely and create their own identity. Woolf wonders who the "Angel in the House" is. Is she the passionate mother who scarifies her life for her children? Is she the devoted wife who serves her husband and obeys him? Is she the pure and simple woman who does not have an identity of her own? Woolf affirms that once women kill the "Angel in the House" in their mind and in the society, they can live, work, create, experience life, gain independence, and know themselves.

The Angel in the House has become a centerpiece for twentieth-century feminist criticism. It both rejects submissive womanhood and evaluates praising female superiority to encounter male domination against her husband dominance. Woolf calls for a rebellious angle rather than a docile "angle in the house." Angela, in "The Legacy", rebels through her writing and her intellectual thinking against her husband's dominance. Moreover, she commits suicide and has her own affair as actions of refusal.

In conclusion, Woolf tries to achieve women rights and freedom, especially, the married ones. She seeks their rights in speaking, thinking, and having their own identities, names, and emotions. In her depiction of married women, she rejects the misrepresentation of women as "the Angel of the house" and replaces it with the rebellious woman who calls for an equal treatment inside and outside home. She demands women's anger and revolution against male's hegemony in the house, society, and everywhere through writing. She bravely criticizes issues like racism and gender discrimination in a country that claims democracy and celebration of diversity. She rejects women's identity crisis in which women depend entirely on men without flourishing themselves. She concentrates on creating women's own identity through knowing the other, men's identity.

Woolf, in "The Legacy", calls for the freedom of a married woman who tries to achieve her independency. Depending on gynocriticism's four models, Angela constructs her own intellectuality and refuses to be a victim of her own society. Her act of writing her own diaries reflects her decision to have her own revolutionary actions away from the sphere of men. She seeks her own room where she can have her own voice and express herself freely without men's superiority. In doing so, Woolf's representation of women presents a clear attempt to overcome the convictions of society and move beyond them, inviting women to have their immortalized mark and impact on men's sphere in a similar manner to that of Angela's diaries. As a recommendation, the paper's frame can be applied to Woolf's novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway*. Moreover, it might be examined in connection with Woolf's personal life.

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