

Epiphany of Woolf: Close Reading of the Last Four Paragraphs of *A Room of One's Own*

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| Received: 03.01.2021 | Accepted: 18.01.2021 | Published: 30.01.2021 |

Abstract: Virginia Woolf's most iconic writing *A Room of One's Own* not only suggests women to follow the path of creative faculty but also puts light on the necessity of having the required needs essential for the physiological and psychological development of a woman as an artist. Woolf's style of demonstrating the proper growth of an artist gets its finality in the last four paragraphs of *A Room of One's Own* where the rhetoric, very interestingly, follows the pattern of American psychologist, Abraham Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs'.

Keywords: Dissociative Identity Disorder, Stream of Consciousness, Hierarchy of Needs, Positive and Negative Motivation, Epiphany.

INTRODUCTION

For the sake of comprehending the epiphany of Woolf in her revolutionary *A Room of One's Own*, this writing attempts a close reading of its last four paragraphs. The epiphany is unquestionably crucial for the proper dissemination of the intended message conveyed by the author; otherwise, the failure in internalizing the essence of the epiphany will surely cause the dreadful consequences through having the lack of active female practitioners in the sphere of literature. This piece of non-fiction comes up as an altered and expanded version of "two papers read to the Arts Society at Newnham and the Odtas at Girton in October 1928" (Woolf 13)[1].

In the first half of the last chapter of the essay, Woolf narrates adopting the voice of Mary Beton as Woolf wants to show how Mary Beton "reached the conclusion – the prosaic conclusion – that it is necessary to have five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door if you are to write fiction or poetry" (Woolf 109) [2]. This is an uncanny move by Woolf; though it apparently seems to the readers that she intentionally plays the role of Mary Beton, this act can be explained in a different way with the help of the idea of "Dissociative Identity Disorder" ("Dissociative Identity Disorder (Multiple Personality Disorder)") as the "1913 Suicide attempt" (Woolf 123) [3] of Woolf might be considered to be one of the major symptoms of this type of disorder. Moreover, in the last paragraph of the essay, Woolf makes the 'imaginary' Judith commit suicide, so Woolf's obsession for suicide is evident. Finally, in 1941, Woolf "drowns herself in the River Ouse, Sussex" (Woolf 124) [4]. This

"Dissociative identity disorder is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct or split identities or personality states that continually have power over the person's behaviour" ("Dissociative Identity Disorder (Multiple Personality Disorder)"). In the middle of the sixth chapter, we can see a definite switch of Woolf from the character of Mary Beton to the character of the self. "The "alters" or different identities have their own age, sex, or race. Each has his or her own postures, gestures, and distinct way of talking. Sometimes the alters are imaginary people; As each personality reveals itself and controls the individuals' behavior and thoughts, it's called "switching." Switching can take seconds to minutes to days" ("Dissociative Identity Disorder (Multiple Personality Disorder)") [5].

This accusation can be defended undoubtedly with the help of one of the literary terms called 'stream of consciousness' as this paper predominantly focuses on the epiphanic moment of Woolf's writing. Moreover, this stream of consciousness is a popular literary device of the twentieth century, and Woolf belongs to the first half of that century. As epiphany and 'stream of consciousness' accompany each other through yoking themselves, it is unquestionably important to define these two terms.

When used as a term in literature, stream of consciousness is a narrative form in which the author writes in a way that mimics or parallels a character's internal thoughts. Sometimes this device is also called "internal monologue," and often the style incorporates the natural chaos of thoughts and feelings that occur in any of our minds at any given time. Just as happens in

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Citation: Chowdhury Omar Sharif (2021). Epiphany of Woolf: Close Reading of the Last Four Paragraphs of *A Room of One's Own*. *Cross Current Int J Peer Reviewed J Human Soc Sci*, 7(1), 41-44.

real life, stream-of-consciousness narratives often lack associative leaps and are characterized by an absence of regular punctuation. ("Stream of Consciousness")[6].

The term epiphany gets connected to 'streams of consciousness for being explained as the moment of sudden realization frothing out of the never-ending chaos of thoughts. While quoting from Martin Puchner's 2013 essay, "Virginia Woolf", LindsayB says that in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf "explores the structures of consciousness" (n. p.). She further says that Woolf "desired to focus on what other people thought of situations rather than the situation itself, which represents the post-impressionist characteristic of focusing on consciousness" (n. p.) [7].

Although the fourth last paragraph initially sounds serious, the tone of the author is actually sarcastic as the pessimism of Woolf regarding the inactivity of female writers is flooded in the expression. The essayist follows the stream of consciousness technique as these are lecture papers addressed to the students. Sudden shifts of ideas by the author get the ultimate destination with the moment of epiphany in the final paragraph of the last chapter. The sarcastic tone of the fourth last paragraph does not come alone; it undoubtedly accompanies motivation. According to Woolf's opinion, women of her age have done nothing. This motivation can be negative which "is understood as the act of forcing the staff members to work by holding out threats or punishment such as reprimands, disciplinary actions, demotion, loss of job, dismissal from the post, deduction of salary, group rejection. Any kind of deterioration may be included in negative motivation" ("Positive & Negative motivation & Maslow's Need hierarchy theory"). "What is your excuse?" (Woolf 115) [8]- This might be a relevant reaction from Woolf to Professor X's derogatory statement in the earlier paragraph. It is really difficult to make Woolf happy with the excuses. Finally, it would be logical to claim that the development of the last four paragraphs can be attached relevantly to the concept of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' which "is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs" (McLeod). At the first and lowest level of this model, there are physiological needs like food, water, shelter, clothing which are already available to women of Woolf's era, so Woolf motivates her audience to go for the higher levels [9].

In the third last paragraph, the readers find a changed Woolf as the tone gets more optimistic and less sarcastic because of the prevailing social changes favouring women. Some readers may find the language of Woolf to be didactic as the author very dominantly takes control over the whole idea of preaching to the audience. She starts talking about the persisting laws which are really inspiring to the audience [10].

When Woolf published this book in 1929, the Married Women's Property Act was nearly fifty years old, the professions had been opened to women for ten years, and they had been given the vote nine years previously. As she herself notes, "the excuse of lack of opportunity, training, encouragement, leisure and money no longer holds good" for women's advancement (117). (Livingston 99) [11].

According to Woolf's opinion, women have already been provided with a lot of opportunities, and these opportunities offered by the state confirm the needs of the second level mentioned by Maslow as property, employment and safety are the builders of the second stage of Maslow's hierarchy (McLeod). Along with these, Woolf emphasizes on earning 500 pounds per year and on having a personal room for maintaining privacy for the exercise of the creative faculty. Though Woolf talks of the importance of privacy of female writers, she never denies the necessity of a family life with a limited number of babies to bear. Isolation is important for creating literary pieces, but this isolation may not result into exile. Intimate familial relationships are valued by Woolf, and these relationships belong to Maslow's third level of needs named "Belongingness and love needs" (McLeod)[12].

In the second last paragraph, Woolf's tone sounds highly suggestive as her words demonstrate that she is ready to accept the contribution of writers of both sexes. This certain type of sexual intimacy of the writers of both sexes can again be related to the third level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod)[13]. The new writers can obviously follow the earlier litterateurs for gathering inspiration. Finally, Woolf discloses her own way of writing, and she sounds like suggesting that this way of writing can also be followed by the young ones present in front of her. The author's sense of self-respect, confidence, and respect from others assists her to be this much suggestive and declarative, and Maslow's fourth level, named "Esteem needs" (McLeod), accommodates confidence, respect from others and self-respect. In the last part of this paragraph, readers may find a self-glorifying author in Woolf, but it is nothing unnatural as a brilliant female writer like Woolf truly deserves the right of self-glorification [11].

In the final paragraph, Woolf ruminates on the fact that female writers should be creating their own history by producing creative pieces of literature. She suggests the audience not to find any reference to Shakespeare's sister in Sir Sidney Lee's writings because being an English biographer and critic; he does not feel it important to talk about the English female writers. He mostly focused on Shakespeare's craftsmanship, and for this reason, a certain grudge of Woolf might be felt here by the readers of the last paragraph of the essay [12].

Shakespeare's sister, Judith, is a creation of Woolf to materialize or to concretize the passion or urge of hidden creativity of female writers. "In this segment, Woolf takes a step back from analyzing historical figures and instead creates a rhetorical situation in which the fictional Judith stands as an example to the young women in the audience of the hardships and hindrances of women writers that she is urging them to overcome" ("Essay about Character Analysis: Judith Shakespeare"). The idea of Judith can easily be related to Derrida's 'Hauntology' which "refers to the situation of temporal, historical, and ontological disjunction in which the apparent presence of being is replaced by a deferred non-origin, represented by 'the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive'" ("Hauntology"). "Such a return from the past by way of the future would certainly engender some archival tremors—not least because Woolf's invocation prefigures Derrida's ghostly politics of memory—his hauntology" (Sørensen) [13]. The imagination of a character like Judith proves the time-transcending nature of a creative writer like Woolf as she gets critical of the restrictions set for the Elizabethan women. Woolf says that getting married at an early age, being a property of their husbands and being beaten by them for not having enough civil rights are some of the major events happening with the Elizabethan women (Woolf 49-52); consequently, in such circumstances, a lot of Elizabethan 'Judiths', with immense potential to be writers, have to kill themselves. All the sisters of Shakespeare very unfortunately died very young except Joan Shakespeare. "It was not the usual custom for girls in this era to attend school so Joan would have stayed at home and helped her mother with the household chores" ("The Brothers and Sisters of William Shakespeare"), but Judith "had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's" (Woolf 55) [14]. Some critical readers may also think that Judith is none other than Woolf herself as she, most probably, gets haunted by Judith. It would not be irrational if some general readers claim that the name 'Judith' has been chosen by Woolf as Shakespeare had a daughter having this name. In the abstract of one of her journal articles, Dorothy Dodge Robbins states:

Virginia Woolf creates both a sister and a creative equal for William Shakespeare and names her Judith. Historical, biblical, and literary sources establish the aptness of Woolf's onomastic decision, if not the definitive answer to the question posed. Shakespeare's daughter, Judith, and Woolf's niece, Judith, are considered as possible models for the Bard's sister. Additionally, the title character of the Old Testament "Book of Judith" and of the early English poem fragment *Judith* is examined as an onomastic source. Finally, Judith Shakespeare is considered as a pseudonym for Woolf herself. (150-158) [15].

This again strengthens the claim of the supposed existence of Woolf's "Dissociative Identity Disorder" ("Dissociative Identity Disorder (Multiple Personality Disorder)") which is already explained in the beginning of this paper. Finally, the imaginary Judith can be compared with the Judith of the Bible. She, being a brave Bethulian widow, kills the enemy general Holofernes after seducing him to the fullest, and; thus, saves Bethulia which is a "curious name, similar to the related Hebrew word for 'virgin'" ("Book of Judith") [16]. This is logically related to Woolf's motif behind writing this particular essay. The Biblical Bethulian Judith saved Bethulia, and the imaginary Elizabethan Judith can do the same magic for the Georgian young women who aspire to be writers. Woolf affirms that both personal and financial freedom can undoubtedly bring the freedom of creativity. She thinks that after achieving the freedom of creativity, women would be able to think out of the box. It is not about imitating someone; rather, it is about using both personal and impersonal experiences to attain a wider perspective as a writer. In this part of the paragraph, Woolf sounds like someone who is opposed to the realist fictions; as a result, from the female writers, a panoramic transcultural type of view is expected by her. In this regard, Rebecca Beatrice Brooks says that Woolf "sees reality as chaotic impressions perceived by the senses, taking place in the triviality and ordinariness of an everyday surrounding." Moreover, Woolf herself says, "I distrusted the cheapness of reality, and in my novels consciousness is itself aesthetic, a subjective and poeticized state of heightened awareness more properly the domain of women than men" (Harding 55) [17]. Unfortunately, this comprehension of real life is not enough for being someone who would be appreciated by Woolf.

On the other hand, there lies the inner life, the 'whatness' of life which is complex and fluid by nature. This inner reality exists along with the outer reality, the material surrounding of a person. She argues that in writing one has to imply mental impressions and represent the external, material reality in its detail at the same time. Only by presenting both sides can a writer capture the true nature of reality, the essence of our existence. (Brooks)

Woolf used to admire Joyce for his treatment of stream of consciousness, but her technique of writing appeared to be unique (LindsayB). Following this, Bousalah rightly says:

Virginia Woolf developed a methodical technique of stream of consciousness; she explored problems of personal identity, she also explored relationships within the movement of time and memory, thoughts and perceptions (Ibid, p.43) The desire of Virginia

Woolf is to recreate a whole universe in the text, to rewrite time, space, the mind and the body in a kind of parallel, relativized world [18].

Bousalah basically focuses on the movement of consciousness between interior and exterior perception along with the movement of consciousness over past, present and future [18]. According to Woolf's opinion, there is nothing significant in getting stuck to the past records of life. Ford says, Woolf's "writing was to reassert a psychic balance against the influence of the mechanical, the atomized self, to cope with an ever changing being and world rather than remain stuck in the repetitions and recurrences of a fixated past. The attempt was to heal the rift between intellectual abstraction and the ever present flow of feeling" (53). The reference to 'sky' and 'tree', in the very last paragraph of *A Room of One's Own*, may refer to a wider history, or Woolf may be referring to other ages as the present condition or the condition, in reality, is more favourable to women than the earlier condition. She is probably trying to inspire them to learn from the past and to set something exemplary for the future generations of female writers. She may be expecting the audience to transcend culture, time and tradition dominated by patriarchy. Whenever they are able to do this, they would be imaginative like Woolf. Whenever the female writers become creative and imaginative, they would be able to visualize Judith, or they themselves would become a bunch of 'Judiths'. In this way, the resurrection of Judith would be possible just like the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus took place for the sake of the salvation of Christianity, and the resurrection of Judith should take place for the salvation of creativity. According to Maslow's opinion, this is the highest stage of needs called "Self-actualization" (McLeod) where a person realizes "personal potential, self-fulfillment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences. A desire "to become everything one is capable of becoming" (McLeod).

The last four paragraphs are crucially important for the fulfilment of epiphanic moment of Woolf's narrative based on the stream of consciousness technique as all the four paragraphs equally contribute to the progression of her arguments for the sake of giving a smooth ending to the essay.

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