

Lecture 30

Feminism and Literature II: Woolf & Simone de Beauvoir

Welcome again to this lecture series on literary theory. As you know, we are in the middle of the section discussing feminism and its relation to literary studies. In our previous lecture we have tried to fix a tentative definition of the term feminism and we had then gone on to discuss the life and works of one of the major early modern feminists Mary Wollstonecraft. In today's lecture we will discuss two more important theorists of the feminist tradition: Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

Virginia Woolf

So to start off with Virginia Woolf, her dates are 1882 to 1941. Woolf was born in London in a family which had strong literary and artistic connections. Her father Leslie Stephen was a literary critic, journalist, and editor, whereas, her mother's aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, was one of the greatest portrait photographers of the 19th century. Woolf grew up among a large number of siblings which included children of her parents as well as half-brothers and half-sisters that Leslie Stephen and his wife had had from their earlier marriage. And it is now known that as a child Woolf was sexually abused by her half-brothers which a number of her biographers have connected to her later mental health issues. However, the dark shadow of the sexual abuse aside, Woolf's childhood was spent in an intellectually invigorating atmosphere.

As a young woman Woolf was an integral part of what is referred to as the Bloomsbury Group or Bloomsbury Set which was a circle of friends and associations that included among others the economist John Maynard Keynes, the literary critic Desmond MacCarthy, the novelist E. M. Forster and the biographer Lytton Strachey. Woolf's future husband, the author and publisher

Leonard Woolf, was also part of this bohemian circle, which during the first half of the twentieth-century formed the British intellectual avant-garde. Today Woolf is primarily known as a novelist whose works like *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* transformed the shape of modern British fiction. But she also wrote some very important non-fictions which are considered as central to the twentieth century feminist movement. In our lecture today we are going to focus on one of these non-fictions titled *A Room of One's Own* which was initially delivered as two separate lectures at the University of Cambridge and then later woven together, expanded, and published in 1929.

But before we can move on to explore this work, let me briefly talk about Woolf's resistance to the term feminism. In her book-length essay titled *Three Guineas*, Woolf argued that feminism was a disparaging term that was forced upon individuals who had tried to speak out in the past for women's rights. Also, interestingly, Woolf considers feminism to be a dated word which needs to be "destroyed" because, according to her, it was "a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day". In any case, irrespective of Woolf's resentment towards the word feminism, her works can be read and indeed has been read as among the most impassioned pleas for women's rights, which, as per the definition we are using, makes her a feminist per-excellence.

A Room of One's Own

So now let us come to the text *A Room of One's Own*. We had ended our previous lecture on Mary Wollstonecraft by discussing how she envisaged the problems as well as the possibility of women emerging on the socio-political stage as rational agents who are at par with men. In Woolf's text, the focus is much narrower and deals with the question "how can women write fiction?" Yet, this very specific question leads Woolf to explore the norms and limitations of the

patriarchal society at large which gives her work a scope almost as broad as Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Woolf's thesis is that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". This statement, which occurs at the very beginning of Woolf's text, though simple in its phrasing hides a revolutionary content. In our discussion of Wollstonecraft's life, we had seen how a very limited number of jobs were open for respectable women in the 18th century British society. About a century and a half later, when Virginia Woolf was writing *A Room of One's Own*, not much had changed. Women could still not be gainfully employed, which forced them forever to be at the mercy of men as far as financial sustenance was concerned. Woolf argues that having an income of £500 a year would completely change the scenario for women. It would free them from the humiliation of having to do those inane jobs which allows them to earn only a pittance. And this will result in a sea-change in the way women carry themselves within the society. So whereas now they have to do "work one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave, flattering and fawning", with an access to £500 there will be a complete change in temper:

No force in the world can take from me my five hundred pounds. Food, house and clothing are mine forever. Therefore not merely do effort and labour cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me. So imperceptibly I found myself adopting a new attitude towards the other half of the human race.

Having a room of one's own, just like having money of her own brings for the woman a sense of freedom. This is because it helps her retire, even if for a limited amount of time, from the routine of domestic chores. In other words, a room of one's own helps a woman to escape the role of being an angel of the house that is determined for her by the patriarchy.

So in this text the question that Woolf takes up as to why there is so little “great” literature written by women compared to that written by men is similar to the question “why women are less rational than men?” that was taken up by Wollstonecraft. And like Wollstonecraft, Woolf too argues that though such difference might be true on the surface, they are caused not by any inherent shortcomings on the part of the women. Rather, they are the result of the lack of unequal treatment and the lack of opportunity that a woman experiences within the patriarchal society. To exemplify this point, Woolf presents a brilliant portrayal of a fictional character named Judith who she imagines to be the sister of the most celebrated English author of all times, William Shakespeare.

Judith Shakespeare

To make this imaginative portrayal of Judith effective, Woolf first presents a brief sketch of William Shakespeare’s life. Woolf narrates how the famous playwright being born as a male-child in a well-to-do family was given formal education which meant that he learnt Latin and classical literature, along with elements of grammar and logic. And clearly such a formal education contributed heavily towards his subsequent development as a playwright. As a young boy, he had the necessary liberty to develop wild habits like poaching rabbits and shooting deer. Also, he married as and when he wished. Later when he ended up in London, he wanted to join the theatre. He was able to fulfill this wish when after holding horses at the stage door for some amount of time he got a job in the theatre. And then there was no looking back:

[He] became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen.

This life of the celebrated William Shakespeare is used by Woolf to act as a foil to her depiction of the imaginary history of Judith. She is introduced as Shakespeare's "wonderfully gifted sister", and this is important because the point that Woolf is trying to drive home here is that even if a woman is as inherently talented as a man, within the patriarchal society she cannot be as successful as a man. Now being a girl child, Judith would not have been sent to a school which meant that she would not have had any knowledge of grammar let alone classical literature. Even if she was as adventurous as her brother she would have been asked to stay at home. And perchance, if out of curiosity she would pick one of her brother's book, "her parents [would come] in and t[ell] her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers".

Now though when compared to the upbringing of William Shakespeare, this might look like cruelty, yet Woolf is careful to point out that her parents would treat Judith like this not because they hate her. Quite on the contrary, they might even love her excessively. The treatment that she receives as a child would rather be determined by the fact that she is a girl who is destined to be a woman and who like all respectable women of her time would be expected to perform domestic chores rather than concern herself with books and papers. Eventually, her parents decide to get her married, and when she protests, her father first beats her up and then begs her with tears in his eyes, "not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage". Here again, note that within the framework of the patriarchal society, such an attitude towards Judith does not reflect hatred on the father's part, but rather love and concern for the daughter's future. Judith, who loves her father as much as he loves her, is caught in a dilemma. Yet, she decides to allow her innate talent to flourish and rather than marry and settle down as a wife she decides to make a career for herself by running away to London.

So in London, just like her brother, Judith visits the theatre and tries to get a job there. But being a woman she is denied entry because we will have to remember that in Shakespearean England all actors, including those who played women's role, were male. Judith is laughed at and humiliated. And not only does she not get a job, being a woman, she is also unable to go to a tavern alone to ask for dinner or roam around the street in the middle of the night. In this state of destitution, a theatre person takes pity on Judith only to sexually exploit her and leave her pregnant. Judith kills herself on a winter night and her body is buried at a cross-road in London. Buses now pass over it every day, yet nobody knows about Judith, the “wonderfully gifted sister” of William Shakespeare.

At one level this story is a disturbing tale of how a woman might literally be driven to kill herself by the expectations and the parochialism of the patriarchal society for just wanting to make a career of one's own choice. But on another level, this story sets the agenda for a feminist literary criticism. Just like Woolf brings the focus on to the invisible Judith who was as talented as her brother, a large part of feminist literary criticism would concern itself with foregrounding the unknown, half-forgotten or marginalized women authors who have not been able to make it to the great canons of literature just for their gender. We will talk about this in further details when we discuss “gynocriticism” in our next lecture. But today let us now move on to another major feminist theorist of the twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir.

Simone de Beauvoir

de Beauvoir, whose dates are 1908 to 1986, is one of the most talented and multi-faceted personalities of the twentieth century Western intellectual history. She was a novelist, a philosopher, a political activist, a travel writer, and of course the key figure who inaugurated what is known as the second-wave of feminism. But for long she had been known primarily as

the partner of the French intellectual Jean Paul Sartre. This was partly due to the fact that de Beauvoir was a woman and as we have seen in the course of these lectures, women are usually placed second in importance to men within patriarchal society. But this reputation of being just a shadow of Sartre was also partly something of her own making because de Beauvoir herself categorized her own works as little more than elaboration of Sartre's philosophy. However, later generations of feminists have tried to decouple de Beauvoir as an intellectual from Sartre and they have to a large extent succeeded in establishing her reputation as a major intellectual figure of the twentieth century by her own right.

de Beauvoir, unlike Woolf, did receive a formal education and was in fact the ninth woman to receive a degree from the Sorbonne university and the first woman to qualify the prestigious competitive examination of "*agrégation*" in philosophy. Between 1929 and 1943 de Beauvoir worked as a school teacher after which she economically sustained herself through her writing. Though de Beauvoir is primarily known outside France today as a philosopher, her first major publication was a novel titled *She Came to Stay* which was published in 1943. Indeed, it was as a novelist that she would later go on to receive one of France's highest awards, Prix Goncourt, which was given to her for her 1954 fiction *The Mandarins*. But undoubtedly, de Beauvoir's most influential work was *Le Deuxième Sexe* or *The Second Sex*, which was published in 1949 and which acted as a trigger that unleashed the second-wave of feminist movement. In the remaining time today our focus would be to try and understand some of the arguments that de Beauvoir makes in this seminal work.

The Second Sex

Now, *The Second Sex* is a book which has multiple layers and therefore it is difficult to summarize or paraphrase it. But the main argument in that book is that women within the

patriarchal society is looked upon as an “other” of the man. That is to say whereas men are regarded as the norm, women are regarded as some sort of a corrupted deviation making them the “second sex”. Now this argument in itself is nothing new. Indeed, we have already encountered this argument in the late eighteenth century writings of Mary Wollstonecraft. What is unique however is the comprehensive way in which de Beauvoir elaborates this central feminist argument with reference to philosophy, history, science, literature and the day to day lived experiences of women.

De Beauvoir starts her thesis by looking at the various explanations which are usually provided to justify women’s position as the deviant other to the normal man. She first attacks the claim that women are “naturally” different from man. Thus, it is often argued that Nature made man and woman as distinct and separate entities and this justifies their different sexual as well as gender roles. De Beauvoir argues that there is nothing inherently natural in the sexual and gender distinction. There are one-celled animals and hermaphrodite species within nature which survives and procreates without any need for this distinction. So to label the othering of women as natural and based on their sex is unsustainable because if it was natural it would be a universally occurring phenomenon. She then attacks the discourse of Freudian psychoanalysis which too provides an apparently natural reason for women’s inferiority. As we know from our earlier discussions, for Freud the male child was taken as the norm and Freud’s theory of the normal psycho-sexual development as articulated through the Oedipal complex is predicated on the presence of a penis. Since a girl child does not have a penis, Freud regarded the woman’s body as a site of lack and argued that their psycho-sexual development proceeds via a much more convoluted and therefore “unnatural” route. De Beauvoir challenged this Freudian lens of looking at women as damaged men and questioned the psychoanalytic theory, which defines

identity almost entirely in terms of unconscious drives or impulses and largely neglects the role of individual choice and societal values and norms in shaping one's gender identity. Finally, de Beauvoir also attacks the Marxist, or rather more specifically Engelsian theory that women are treated as inferior because of the division of labour which identifies men as breadwinners. De Beauvoir argues that this theory does not explain how such a division of labour originally came into place, and it is this that she sets out to explain.

De Beauvoir argues that women's othering happened in the primitive human society because she was identified with the process of reproduction and procreation. Now since this argument is at the core of de Beauvoir's thesis, we will go over it slowly. According to de Beauvoir, sexual reproduction, though important is looked upon as the repetition of the same which is ubiquitous in the whole of the animal world. For de Beauvoir, human beings as a race from the very beginning valued progress over repetition. In other words, they valued productive action which would help them surpass their own conditions of existence over reproduction which would merely help them sustain as a race through a repetition of the same. This resulted in the original devaluation of women who were caught up in the cycles of reproduction and child bearing in contrast to men who could afford to be more adventurous and became inventors to increase the tribe's resources to sustain life. In de Beauvoir's own words:

Because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, [the woman] is condemned to domestic labor, which locks her into repetition and immanence; day after day it repeats itself in identical form from century to century; it produces nothing new. Man's case is radically different. [...] to appropriate the world's treasures, he annexes the world itself. Through such actions he tests his own power; he posits ends and projects paths to

them: he realizes himself as existent. To maintain himself, he creates; he spills over the present and opens up the future.

De Beauvoir argues that it is because man has the ability to open up the future that he establishes himself as the normative human being. The woman on the other hand, kept away from this adventurous life by her “absurd fertility”, becomes the second sex. This subservient status, which is established in the primitive human tribe is then even further confirmed as the human society moves towards the concept of private property when women are reduced to the status of being owned by some male or the other.

De Beauvoir points out that the status of women as the other is consistently maintained within the society through constant mythologizing. This means that either in the form of religious discourse or in the form of literature we are constantly fed with images of women either as goddess or as dangerous sexual temptresses. In both the cases the images of women are constructed as beyond that of a normal human being and in both the cases the images are projections of men’s own fears and desires. Which means that even when she is being hailed as a goddess she is being defined by men and their wishes and desires. And if you want to understand how suffocating this situation could be for a woman then I would suggest you watch Satyajit Ray’s 1960 film *Debi* (literally *The Goddess*) which depicts the horrific process of deification of a woman by a patriarch.

Anyway, coming back to de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* she supplements these abstract theoretical arguments about the status of women as the other by providing a narration about the concrete life experiences of women within the patriarchal society and how they are affected by the consistent process of devaluation. This process starts from the very childhood when the members of the family in particular and the society in general try to groom a girl child as a

woman and teach her to be “feminine”. This process of becoming feminine involves training the girl in domestic chores which fixes for her a particular kind of role within the society. It also involves alienating the girls from their own growing bodies by associating the notion of shame with female sexual desire and with puberty. A dosage of literature like Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty in turn teaches the girl to be submissive in love and to believe that their redemption lies in the arrival of a Prince Charming. When the promised man however arrives to “redeem” the woman through marriage it proves to be an ambiguous affair. It does give the woman financial stability but traps her in an unequal relation where she is expected to serve her husband and to connect to the wider world through him. De Beauvoir points out that this lack of personal freedom within marriage has dangerous consequences for the woman’s identity as a mother. This is because her marital frustrations often severely impact her relationship with her children. Also her desire to gain agency usually manifests itself through an excessive attempt to control her children.

But then what does de Beauvoir suggest? How should a woman escape this trap of inferiority? De Beauvoir points out that women during her time has far more rights and privileges than what they had earlier. But she argues that even all of it taken together cannot emancipate a woman if she lacks economic autonomy. So in other words, though we see women gaining a lot of civil liberties in today’s world, the key factor to watch out according to de Beauvoir is woman’s participation in the work force. And there we see that in most countries the ratio of working men to working women is still abysmal. De Beauvoir’s solution is that women should escape from the trap of their “absurd fertility” and move from merely performing a reproductive role within the society to performing more and more productive roles. Yet, de Beauvoir also acknowledges that this is a difficult move because it is regarded as undermining a woman’s “femininity” which

usually defines her within the patriarchal society. However, de Beauvoir stresses that this move must be accomplished so that the reign of freedom can triumph in the human society and men and women can meet each other not as battling forces but as peers who come together to “unequivocally affirm their brotherhood”.

So with this we end our lecture today. We will carry forward with our discussion on feminism and literary studies in the next lecture. Thank you.