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Ideological Intersection: Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous With reference to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa"

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ABSTRACT

Like almost every other writer, Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous were also products of their respective times and cultures, and had their own ideologies as to how to 'liberate' women through writing. Writing apart by about fifty years, both of these European writers have felt for and contributed to the cause of women upliftment. This submission evaluates their stances in terms of their commonalities as well as differences. Though, their prime concern, fight and hopes remain the same – emancipation of women and her writing, both standing free against the shackles of patriarchy. *A Room of One's Own*, often called the 'Feminist Bible' stresses largely on economic independence and privacy as crucial pre-requisites for a woman-artist to be able to write fiction of any merit, rising beyond psychological obstacles. Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa" employs a more revolutionary tone, asking for women to bring their bodies, hearts and minds into speech and writing. Women must shatter the framework of institutions, blow up the law and re-define truth. Only then, the dreaded Medusa, on closer inspection, will appear both, beautiful as well as laughing.

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Introduction

One of the most distinguished writers of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf was also the epicentre of the 'Bloomsbury Group', a diverse group of writers, artists and philosophers who gathered together and discussed arts, philosophy and religion. Her *A Room of One's Own* (1929) began as a pair of lectures on 'Women and Fiction' given in October 1928 to students at the two women's colleges of Cambridge University (Newnham and Girton, here fictionalized as Fernham) and was published as a book in 1929. Hélène Cixous, a French philosopher, writer and literary critic is considered as one of the mothers of post-structuralist feminist theory. "The Laugh of the Medusa" is an essay written originally in French (*Le Rire de la Méduse*) in 1975 and translated into English in 1976 by Keith and Paula Cohen.

Discussion

Scholarly and compassionate at the same time, *A Room of One's Own* serves as a touchstone for literary criticism and feminist theory. The title comes from Woolf's conception that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. Thus, privacy, solitude and economic self-sufficiency are the mandatory requirements for a woman writer according to Woolf. Spatial freedom and material comfort of the room extends to that of the mind. There is an enriching sense of liberation which comes out of detachment, autonomy, opportunity and means of one's own self. The discourse has been presented through the medium of a first-person narrator, Mary Beton. She, as a less competent researcher than Woolf, is able to stand between the readers and Woolf, the famous author and critic.

For Cixous, however, it is nothing lesser than any revolution. In the very beginning of the essay, she makes

evident all what she has overlapping with Woolf and what is distinct. She writes, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 291).

For Woolf, five hundred pounds a year stands symbolically for the power to contemplate and a room with a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself. She believes that a fixed income brings about change of temper. It not only relieves woman of the obligation to work for a living, but also allows her to forgive men for their injustices and biases towards women. This financial independence grants her objectivity of thought and intellectual freedom to think of things in themselves. She feels risen above and unperturbed by all kinds of criticism and disapproval. She writes, "I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me" (Woolf 35). A room without casual interpretations, alone, unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex is what she demands and prescribes.

Cixous, speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man, also wonders about and glorifies the infinite richness inherent in each woman's individual constitution. She believes that one cannot talk about female sexuality—uniform, homogenous, classifiable into codes—any more than one can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's streams of imagination, like creative arts of music, painting and writing, are incredible and inexhaustible. Their expression, in spite of being condemned with horror and indignation, makes their frigidified bodies seethe underneath.

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Where Woolf devotes much of her essay into investigating the conditions and literary freedom of women over a period of three centuries, Cixous too maintains that the number of women writers—across languages, cultures and ages—(while having increased very slightly from the nineteenth century on) has always been ridiculously small. Both have concluded about the sad role of culture in brainwashing and hampering women's desire to create and write, where most of them surrendered and hardly came out in the open with their writings. And even if few dared to write amidst constant distractions and to get their works published, it was with a non-de-plume. They took resort in a name that was either masculine or one which gave the society and readers the benefit of doubt, the name which was anything but an evidently female one. Their works were full of resentment, bitterness and grievances.

Cixous, in her discourse has a passionate plea to women who must proclaim and write about her quests, interrogate and experiment with her bodily functions and her erotogeneity with passion and precision. She entreats women to write, to take her body. Writing should not merely be reserved for men or be kept in secret. No man and the "imbecilic capitalist machinery" should hold women back from writing their true texts: "the female-sexed texts" (Cixous 292). This is only how she visualizes the resurgence of new woman with the *new insurgent* writing (italics as in text, 295).

Woolf illustrates the fictional life of her imaginary creation, William Shakespeare's sister, Judith as she calls her, who possessed her brother's genius but not his opportunities. William's 'hub of the universe' is a stark contrast to his extraordinarily gifted sister who is betrothed before she was out of her teens, who elopes, gets pregnant and eventually commits suicide in the face of all prevalent adversity. Her talent is stifled, obscured and erased. Cixous talks about women who want to write, their desires overflow and invent new desires, their bodies know unheard-of-songs; and time and again, they have felt full of luminous torrents. But these hardly translated into words which was the collective fortune of all women. They too were dealt with as offenders—they were made to feel ashamed, scared and insane if they dared to seek the meaning of their outbursts—and allowed the volcano of their activity and creativity erupt. Their expression was discouraged, opposed and outright rejected. To dream, to demand and to rebel was not a prerogative reserved for women as society (and even law at that time) only facilitated the growth, quest and future of men. Savita Goel, in her article "The Coming of Age of Shakespeare's Sister: Woolf's *Room*" talks about the confinement of women within domestic and maternal domain by men, who thought, what Elaine Showalter suggested that "women writers were women first, artists second" (Goel 98).

Sutapa Chaudhuri writes about the hypothetical proposition suggested by Woolf. She adds, Consider...how literature would suffer if men were only portrayed in a manner comparable to that in which women have been traditionally portrayed by men, as lovers of women only, that is, and never as friends of other men, or as soldiers, or thinkers, or dreamers. If this were the case... in Shakespeare, we would retain most of *Othello*, and a good deal of *Antony*, but no *Caesar*, no *Hamlet*, no *Lear*. (Chaudhuri 236)

Both Woolf and Cixous offer a critique to literary trends and traditions, which Cixous calls the "*marked* writing" (italics as in text, 294), repressed under and run by a libidinal, cultural and political, typically masculine economy. She

argues that the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, it has been one with the privileged patriarchal tradition – "self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism" (Cixous 295). Woolf in her critical treatise, dissects it and correlates it with gender relations and also ponders over the effects of poverty and wealth on the mind. Bringing in the men-women relationship, she rightly puts how women have served all these centuries as looking glasses, with the delicious magical power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Whenever a woman begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks. Thus, it is only a woman's obscurity and succumbing to the phallogocentric literary mode and patriarchal social mode that paves the path of men to greatness—to be fit, to survive, to suppress and to rule.

Both the writers have cited and condemned the ironical value that women have had in literature as opposed to her pathetic and oppressed life in society in general. Cixous writes about the fact that either women are altogether obscured or are represented in a classic manner—sensitive, intuitive, dreamy etc, which is but just a slight vision of her identity as a whole. Woolf also describes the male dominated and resentful unidimensional studies as "written in red light of emotion and not in white light of truth" (Woolf 30). For a woman has to be defeated for men to be victorious, a woman has to shrink for men to feel themselves magnified. As quoted by Savita Goel in her article, Mary Ellman believed that male critics treated books written by women as if "texts themselves were women, and they impose on them the same kind of stereotypes that generally characterize thinking about women" (Goel 99).

Woolf strikingly yet beautifully juxtaposes the importance of women, "Imaginatively she is of highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history" (Woolf 41). Even if we turn around the pages of literature, some of the most profound and inspiring words come from her speech but in real life, she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. Woolf explains how criticism, discouragement and indifference of men had led women into a perpetual strife against themselves.

Cixous too points out that speech itself has been a torment to women, they are anxious as if daring to do a feat. The woman seems to be in a struggle against conventional man, his influence, power, money and dominance. It is a great transgression for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—"A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine" (Cixous 296). Her rhetoric has two sides and aims—to destroy and break up; and to foresee the unforeseeable. She advocates that the future should be independent from the past. The effects of the past should neither be strengthened by repeating nor be rendered irremovable, labelled as inevitable, inalterable destiny.

Woolf elucidates another reason of women's silence: lack of privacy. Bound to a common family sitting room, not only reduced the amount of work women produced, but also made sure that her writings would never rival or question male literature—"Had Tolstoy lived...in seclusion...however edifying the moral lesson, he could scarcely...have written *War and Peace* (Woolf 67). Further, Woolf asserts *War and Peace* is taken to be one of the world's greatest novels as it is the masculine values that have been more prevalent.

Thus, the effects of poverty and chastity would have clearly been evident in the form of limitations in a woman's domain of creativity.

Both Woolf and Cixous have also openly blamed the social structure and male dominance which has led to unfortunate and regressive turn of events, be it in society or in literature. Cixous laments, "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs" (Cixous 293). Woolf too has talked about the sad practice of women disliking women and being unreasonably and relentlessly harsh towards them.

Cixous believes that everything will change once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is in one woman always a hidden and available locus for the other. According to what she propagates, when a woman comes to writing, her writings should not inscribe femininity. She should be able to surpass the 'marked writing' which has been the locus for women's subjugation. Only then she will have her will, and not function merely as the servile shadow of the marginalizing "militant male" (Cixous 296). And thereby, there will be an invention of writing which would be irreducible by socio-political and historico-cultural dynamics of sexual opposition. Her libido will bring about radical mutation as power relations will be altered and individualities will be produced.

Both the writers have used the terms 'white ink' and 'invisible ink', though in different contexts. Woolf talks of female talent asserting that Nature in her most irrational mood, has traced in invisible ink on the walls of the mind a premonition which these great artists confirm, a sketch which only needs to be held to the fire of genius to become visible. Woolf believes that women think back through their mothers and in turn, imbibe the patterns of an entire lineage of subconscious of subservience. Cixous too talks about the dominating, consistent and universal role of the woman as a mother—that of being the source of goods and nourishment. A woman stockpiles on herself the identity of a nobody. She writes, "There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (Cixous 297).

Woolf believes that to be liberated and to write freely as well as fearlessly, a woman must consume all impediments and become incandescent. To gain this artistic and individual, intellectual incandescence, female writers must have what Coleridge termed as the mind which is "androgynous" (Woolf 93), resonant and porous, transmitting emotion without any impediment and should be naturally creative and undivided. Only when the male and female powers fuse, the mind is fully fertilized and utilizes fully all its faculties. This harmony and reconciliation of feminine and masculine elements lays the foundation for literary excellence. Cixous also speaks of a "bisexual, hence neuter" writing emerging from "merger-type bisexuality" (Cixous 299), which involves non-exclusion of both the sexes and their differences. Only then, the women will be able to transcend the confining differences of gender, class, race or religion.

In her article "Virginia Woolf and Androgyny", Farwell talks about androgyny as a sensitive understanding of the "full range of human insight" (435). She also speaks about Annis Pratt, in whose terms, androgynicity is a "delightful interchange between qualities usually set in opposition to one another" (442).

Moving further and beyond with what Woolf contents herself with (namely, a room and a fixed income), Cixous takes the female liberation to another level, by privileging not only the mind, intellect, feelings but also the female body and

her voice, which in a vicious loop, censor and inhibit the breath and speech as well. She demands the claim of what has been confiscated from women. In Cixous's words,

Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth...An act which will not only 'realize' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal...(296)

In an interview by Christiane Makward, Cixous talks about the importance of unearthing the unconscious by involving the bodies, ears, skin and eyes to counter the repressive sexual differences which are subsequently displaced and transformed by culture. She wants to revive women by re-defining the "articulation man/woman" (25). She is against the inhibiting, immobilizing marginalization, that, in her own words, "would amount to going back to this sort of absurd dream: a man's world/ a woman's world". She aims for a thorough re-thinking of "the body, of sexuality, of the rapports between the sexual and the cultural" (24).

Conclusion

Positivity and hope can evidently be seen strewn in both the essays. For Woolf, with her room of her own and five hundred pounds a year, when a woman is allowed to speak her mind, "she will be a poet...in hundred years' time" (Woolf 89), then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Cixous too heralds the arrival of this "New Woman" (Cixous 296) who writes woman—who has returned "from afar, from always, from 'without'...; from below, from beyond 'culture': from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to eternal rest (Cixous 293).

Above was an attempt to consider these two impactful women writers from Europe in terms of how and to what extent their essays and ideologies overlap as well as function at different stratas—both at the same time making their resolute legion for women's liberation against patriarchy stronger and more influential.

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