The Financial Autonomy in Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”

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ABSTRACT

The essay “A Room of One’s Own” by Virginia Woolf was published in 1929 and was based on two papers at Newnham College Arts Society and Girton College in October 1928. This essay investigates the relationship between gender, economic freedom, and creative expression. Woolf contends that for women to reach their full intellectual and artistic potential, they must have their own physical space as well as a reliable source of money. The researcher goes into the historical, social, and economic issues that contributed to women's financial insecurity in the early twentieth century. The researcher also emphasizes how Woolf's request for economic independence as a prerequisite for artistic expression was both a reflection of her own experiences and a rallying cry for the larger feminist movement. Woolf illuminates the status of women, particularly female artists in a male-dominated world. This challenge exposes women to financial difficulties since they cannot compromise to put their thoughts or ideas down on paper. Woolf uses unique literary skills in her piece of writing to prove that focusing on looking for money or financial autonomy fosters women in controlling their own lives and space rather than strengthening men into being more dominant.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Freedom, Financial Autonomy, feminism.

1. Introduction

"A Room of One's Own," a significant work in feminist literature and critical thought, was published in 1929 by Virginia Woolf. Woolf delves into questions of gender, creativity, and economic independence, with a particular emphasis on the concept of financial autonomy. Woolf's essay appears at a pivotal point in literary history, criticizing deeply ingrained patriarchal standards of her period and pushing for women's rights to a literal and metaphorical "room of their own." Woolf contends that financial freedom is a significant predictor of women's ability to express themselves artistically in a society dominated by gender inequality and systemic impediments. She contends that economic freedom frees women from the limits of financial reliance on males, giving them the time, space, and agency to cultivate their creative voices. This essay dives into Woolf's captivating narrative as she navigates the literary landscapes of history and fiction, blending her own experiences and insights with a critical examination of the constraints placed on women's artistic pursuits. Woolf's plea for financial autonomy resonates through time, transcending the context in which it was written in the early twentieth century, and continues to stimulate discussions about female equality, creative freedom, and economic self-sufficiency. In this study of "A Room of One's Own," we dive into Virginia Woolf's main themes of financial autonomy. We look at how Woolf's story unfolds, the historical environment in which it arose, and the lasting importance of her ideas in modern discussions about women's empowerment and artistic expression. We obtain a better grasp of the enormous impact of financial autonomy on women's literary endeavors and creative goals by analyzing Woolf's lyrical prose and perceptive insights.

1.1 Literature review

The task of financial challenges and financial oppression has historically faced women and traces back ages since their fathers also dominated their mothers. (Woolf,1929) seems to regret the foundation their fathers laid in terms of fostering gender-based financial discrimination. Woolf gives the example of Mrs. Seton, who was an intellectual female, who worked at a university and was paid badly. Woolf made an obvious point that “Not every woman needs to have thirteen children”. In fact, some women might decide against having children which is their choice. Another example is Carmichael, a genius unknown girl who used to write while in her bed-sitting room despite
her lack of desirable factors—money, idleness, and time, yet she did not perform badly (Woolf, 1929). Women who were moved beyond social norms were successful despite hindrances. Woolf also claimed that, if she, her mother, and the mother before, devised, learned, or understood the great art of making money like her father and her forefathers, they could have left her with a lot of money. However, the status in which the forefathers limited their mothers from utilizing their endowed abilities continued to bite in the mid-twentieth century, where Woolf feels that it entangled their independence.

The restrictions women faced for many centuries hindered them from achieving their potential and goals due to a lack of opportunities to engage in productive work and thoughts. With such restrictions, it was difficult to sustain their financial freedom through their earnings. Women have always been poor and helpless since the beginning of time (Engels, 2018). Woolf (1929) illustrates her postulation that only very few women had written successful poetry as compared to novels, due to frequent interruption and responsibilities. With little to contribute to the community and less support to engage in productive activities such as writing implies that women will always be overwhelmed by male dominance. Additionally, they will never have a place in the financial hierarchy and autonomy and men are considered to be the creative lot.

Financial mismanagement is also critical in limiting financial freedom, something Woolf claims to affected most women in the past. Woolf did not solely blame societies and the older generation of men for holding women captive. Although she does not intend to disgrace their mothers, she believes that their mothers mismanaged the finances and affairs which led to their “current” condition. She states that many women could not account for their money due to clumsy buying behavior that had led to poor financial status. Yap et al., (2018) also teach the generation the importance of effective financial management and accountability as a significant practice for financial stability and independence. Financial accountability refers to important controlled procedures that enable the commercial traceability of financial transaction processes and structures.

Woolf in her essay also reflected on her life and financial situation which she claims to be an inheritance from her aunt which guarantees her financial security. She stated that her aunt gave her a fortune of “five hundred a year” which was a respectable amount for a young lady (Woolf, 1929). On one hand, she was assertive and boasted her ability to meet life demands, while on the other hand, she sympathized with lower-class women or those who had no such good fortune. Hence, she has the chance to compare the historical aspect after having tasted both conditions and witnessed her aunt’s financial growth through writing. She is obsessed with seeing a new phase of women who have the space to write and enjoy financial freedom. With the fortune from her aunt, she was able to examine and look forward to her life of actual focus writing and extend her financial security.

Woolf draws the difference between two classes of women in Woolf’s era those who believe in men’s domination and responsibility on financial matters, and those who claim to be independent. The speaker is among the independent women who are for women to be empowered and accorded freedom and space to make independent decisions. The speaker insisted that despite the challenges, she understands how society works. Hence, she need not hate men nor flatter with any man, no man had the guts to hurt her, nor did she rely on any man to give her anything (Woolf, 1929). In contrast, it is absurd how her society has subjected its residents to captivity. Woolf aspired to see women enjoy this autonomy by only realizing their abilities and pushing towards financial autonomy, but only if they agree to work.

1.2 Methodology

This research will discuss and implicate Woolf’s ideas on financial autonomy from her essay “A Room of One’s Own” on contemporary discussions around gender equality, women’s empowerment, and creative expression. The moral message of this essay is to show that if a woman wants to create fiction, she needs money and a room of her own. That shows that Financial independence continues to be an important aspect of women’s ability to engage in artistic and intellectual activities. This method is developing a better awareness of the complicated relationship between gender, economic independence, and artistic expression through themes, structural content, and literary styles.

2. Financial Autonomy as a Source of Discrimination

It is notable how societies promote discrimination and segregation due to their financial position by linking every
aspect with financial status. The comparison between votes and money assesses the key item that would be more likely to facilitate faster access to power (Woolf, 1929). Money is superior since society would accord a rich person more status, leading to more influence which is a consequence of power from financial accumulation. According to Jespersen (2018), money is power since money buys commodities that also have an impact on an individual’s behavioral consequences. In most cases, women fall victim, especially when imposed on them to take a subordinate role, as in the case of Woolf’s society. A society characterized by such status and grouping based on financial abilities is prone to inequalities subjected to inferior classes.

Having financial independence is essential at individual and social levels since they will not have to disturb anyone else for financial support, especially, men to earn their living. The essay insists that women face many challenges and commitments which interrupt their chances to shine. For example, being the inferior group in the face of men indicates that they have to undertake inferior roles and implement their superiors’ decisions or commands (Hampton, 2018). Their role in society, including raising children also shrinks their chances to be independent. This status subjects women to enclosed “rooms” with limited to no space to make their choices, limiting their opportunities to make money.

Women limited financial status due to male dominance, the place of women also accounted for women’s financial independence, necessary space, and privacy. For example, women were expected to remain in their homes and reproduce, a challenge that extended their economic instability since they could only rely on men to earn a living. Also means that they were never free to form their opinions. Women were confined in their homes, with the obligation to take care of the children (Hillary, 2018), for example, the speaker references their mothers who gave birth to thirteen children at St. Andrews.

Like Woolf, women are only left with fiction. Through rhetorical questions, Wolf leaves the reader to ponder the relationship between poverty and fiction. This condition is evident when the speaker keeps on assessing the wealth status of rich men and contemplates such life as a woman.

2.1 Money, Power, and Intellectual Freedom

There is a noticeable correlation between money and power. Woolf helps the readers understand how intellectual freedom results in financial autonomy. With these attributes, it is easy to accumulate power and authority to make a decision. Since women do not have power due to their stifled financial independence, their intellectual freedom and creativity have been captured and muted throughout the ages. Woolf testifies to this notion by specifying how material things determine an individual’s intellectual freedom (Woolf, 1929). It is also in modern society where wealthy people are the most influential and are considered to be the most intellectual regardless of their level of education. According to Woolf, women in her society were considered to have less intellectual freedom. Such consideration mounted an inferiority complex among women and justified their denial of a chance to write poetry or seek money.

It is easy to control or dominate a person or a particular group upon weakening their financial ability. By instilling subordinate behavior in women, men in Woolf’s era weakened their responsivity to the perception of subordination and power. The narrator lamented that the community has continually weakened women to control them. The level of submissiveness in the essay came into play when she claimed that women were not allowed to earn. This situation resulted in a distaste for financial power, because, even if they earned any amount, they were supposed to hand it over to men who were to make financial decisions. Women, regardless of the essence of purchasing anything or stocking their house, were not to spend any penny without their husbands’ permission. These conditions meant that men had to continue dominating society due to their superiority in financial autonomy.

Sacrifice is a key to enhancing one’s commitment to consolidating wealth and dominance. The author proved that writing was easy but essential in enabling financial breakthroughs in a highly alienated society, both financially and intellectually. Woolf reflects on how women are left behind or discouraged from taking any step in a male-dominated society (Lusardi, 2019), where men are the sole writers and financial decision-makers. Ranking women as inferior discouraged any efforts to undertake any role meant for men. Woolf used a different example to illustrate how some women like Behn, who was considered to be the first Englishwoman to earn her living by writing, accumulated financial power through writing.
Intellectual freedom is a basic necessity for financial autonomy in decision-making which leads to financial accountability. Woolf challenged women that, despite their older generations’ contribution to the financial dependence in their modern era, they should learn from their mistakes and seek their space. In the example of the heirs of Mrs. Seton’s grandmothers, she claims that they used to mismanage their affairs gravely, without sparing for amenities such as wine, beadles, turf, cigars, books, libraries, leisure, and partridges. It is a significant lesson given on how they used to earn, yet they could only “raise bare walls out of bare earth” (Woolf, 1929, p.20). After all their hard work, women could only afford to give all their earnings to their husbands, leaving them empty-banded, a significant contributor to their poverty level.

2.2 Feminism and Financial Freedom

Despite men’s domination and subjecting women to constraints that limit their financial stability, men disregard them for their incapability and lack of dedication. An example of such a woman is Aphra Behn, who was a lower-class and middle-class woman who was determined to write (Woolf, 1929). Despite their decision, they were not even admired by society but instead were belittled and faced almost unnatural thoughts. Rather than an inspiration to young women, society viewed Behn as a deterrent against women’s aspiring to live a life of one’s wit by showing how to make money with a pen. It is a clear indication of the segregation of visionary women who were perceived to contribute to promoting intellectual freedom (Mayall & Mayall, 2018) as an initial stage towards financial freedom and growth.

The financial discrepancy in society between women and men during Woolf’s era extended the myth that women were less creative and less successful writers than their male counterparts. According to (Woolf, 1929), however successful a female writer could be considered to be, they could not write a substantial “without ceasing to be common property” (64). Additionally, some writers’ compositions could not be approved or considered without approaching a great man writer for help. This postulation was critical in undermining the women’s performance and independence which also contributed to their financial strain.

Woolf was adamant that men have a responsibility to render women more helpless by dominating their wives and children. Men had the superior decision in financial matters which restricted financial independence among women and decision-makers. Although if women had the privilege to earn money, they left it to their husbands. This situation had been a common stance in many traditional societies, where women had to render their earnings to their husbands for allocation and utilization (Kitchen et al., 2019). Such a situation displays the financial dominance of men over women, who, even if their husbands opted to mismanage the money, women had no position in giving opinions about finances. As a feminist, Woolf claims that such an initiative could never interest her at all. She is obliged that such financial autonomy affected women’s ability to implement or craft ideas which could lead to financial growth and autonomy.

Woolf also paints an image of her bewildered status upon imagining the financial strain women continue to face. She was pessimistic about women who continued to live in a constrained livelihood and subordination (Richie, 2018). She also visualizes the fate of unsecured women and those with low or no personal income. She concludes that these women have no guaranteed freedom to secure space and privacy, and the financial ability to focus on the task of writing even if they have ambitions to do it. This postulation is critical in highlighting the need for financial stability to venture into more diverse aspirations or tasks.

3. The Importance of Work for Women’s

Woolf understood the significance of these lectures in shedding light on the plight of women and how they can promote their financial autonomy in their professional and social lives (Agrawal et al., 2021). Directing the argument to the young women aimed to change the fate of women in the next generation since the older generation had already been trapped. Financial independence and autonomy advocate for individual efforts. As long as one is trying, it is possible to achieve their financial objective. According to Woolf (1929), her aunt was one of the few ladies who learned the essence of hard work regardless of societal beliefs and situations. Additionally, Woolf’s aunt, Mary Beton helped her learn a significant lesson and helped her engage in productive work. Despite receiving five hundred every year from her aunt, she had also learned several roles which added several pounds into her pocket. For example, she had harnessed her writing skills and made her living by “cadging odd jobs from newspapers,” reporting different wedding or donkey shows in the locality, addressing envelopes, making artificial
flowers, and teaching alphabets to small kids in a kindergarten (Woolf, 1929). According to Woolf, she complimented these jobs which were segregated for women before 1918 to increase the income.

Woolf revealed the significance of working to help understand the worth of one’s money which is critical in ensuring financial management. Wasting finances is a loophole to creating financial difficulties, irrespective of one’s earnings. Despite getting few earnings by accumulating the money from different hard sources, the speaker noted that it was worth spending money on unnecessary items, knowing how hard it was doing the work (Woolf, 1929). The money acted as a reminder of the hard work or encounters, which either triggered fear or bitterness, resulting in effective financial management.

This essay helps the reader reflect on the sources of finances and the preferences or biases they may find themselves in while selecting jobs. The speaker indicated that her need for money implied that she had to undertake numerous tasks, some of which she did not do, in some she worked like a slave, fawning and flattering. However, economists view that the higher the risk, the higher the returns also corresponds to Woolf’s scenario (Wolf & Caridad y Ocerin, 2021).

Woolf indicated how securing her own money secured her and transformed her despite facing challenges as a woman, which also indicated the need to focus on individual financial goals. The desire to find her financial freedom melted her fear of death. She exclaims that for her, fixed income brought about a sudden change of temper from bitterness to happiness (Woolf, 1929). She claimed that anytime she changed a ten-shilling note, she rubbed off the rust and corrosion of the tasks she undertakes yet she was a woman. Corrosion and rust are symbolized to represent the bitterness and fear that couple every woman’s life, especially if they fail or are restricted from work. Upon finishing these roles, any worry about necessities fades. This comfort is brought about by the reassurance that she will be able to enjoy her “food, house, and clothing” (Woolf, 1929).

Woolf also attested to her financial autonomy coming from her efforts and dedication regardless of her social status or perception. She indicated that having looked for the money herself gives her the right to make decisions over it. When a person has worked for the money, they may have the greatest control over what they allocate or use the money to secure their interests (Shapiro, 2018). Her shady and amorous dedication to writing steered her to her financial independence (Jensen, 2022), as she notably advocated for women to earn something however small. Woolf boasted how remarkable it is to slip a piece of silver in her purse after working for it. She noted that no force or anyone in the world could take the five hundred pounds from her, since the money belonged to her as long as she worked for it. According to (Woolf, 1929) money dignifies everything frivolous if paid for. This advancement made her unique ahead of lower- or medium-class women who were unwilling to take risks.

The contrast in financial position and responsibilities between the two categories of people in Woolf’s society has sought ways to integrate despite their differences. (Woolf,1929) acknowledges that people facing difficulties are also critical in promoting tangible evidence of the need to accord all people their space and freedom. Hence, there is no need to hate, blame, or despise anyone based on their sex or class since the “other half or human race” who does not believe or fear expressing their opinions against oppression is not their wish. The author acknowledged that such people were never responsible for their actions, but rather were driven by instincts beyond their control. Given that there was a growing number of women joining Woolf’s rank or embracing the opinion was significant in advancing opinions in transforming the community.

The essay also initiated the literary legacy as a foundation for good fortune for women in the future. Woolf highlights her intention by offering one “minor” opinion aimed at helping women secure freedom for women in writing fiction. This intention is an indirect key to advancing women toward their financial autonomy by generating money through their writing (Agrawal et al., 2021). By pinpointing the great problem facing societies, she enlightened young scholars on the key issues they should address going forward. Hence, it is possible to illuminate the root cause of issues ailing society.

The essay also triggers the reader to assess how societies confronted gender issues and how the new era was ready to take up the role or initiative to correct this condition. Woolf posed the question to the brilliant students at Girton or Newnham on what role they would be willing to take to ensure mass information and why they would embrace it, unlike their dominated era. Rather than the question of individual financial performance and how society would embrace those with financial difficulties, the common questions were the number of children, the
time of marriage, and how he or she has kept the house. According to Ulbrich et al., 2018) this situation causes retrogressive growth due to less consideration for significant issues such as how to complement financial sources, including helping one’s partner to enhance financial stability.

Woolf also proved that information and awareness creation is significant in enhancing societal growth and guiding victims of financial oppression into their freedom. Woolf was taken aback by the delusional notion about women’s inability to safeguard or draw their financial and intellectual freedom path. Misjudgment of external realities despite the inconvertible evidence about the chances of women to be successful writers and efficient financial management have halted how societies appreciate women's efforts (Kincheloe, 2018). Woolf highlighted key examples, including her aunt, are good indicators that women are capable of following their ambitions and becoming successful. The fact that these writers were successful amid significant resistance and social misconception about them makes the initiative and Woolf’s message more promising.

Encouraging women to join in the agreeable qualities of writing or seeking finances was for the good of a family and society. When society empowers women financially, it is possible to support the whole family, leading to an improved life. Additionally, financial independence for women is of practical importance, since a family man may die or face financial or mental challenges (Chodorow, 2018). In such a situation, the family may face a disaster, unless a rare help arrives. With the ability to earn her money and acquire financial stability, a woman will continually support the family.

Multiple aspects and financial impacts are associated with space, privacy, and money. Woolf cannot dissociate the link between the three concepts of building one’s wealth and luxury. She notes that there are numerous adorable traits, features, and items, including deep armchairs, adorable drinks, smoke, and pleasant carpets linked with financial independence. Hence, they define geniality, dignity, and urbanity, all of which are offspring from luxury, space, and privacy (Woolf, 1929). However, the forefathers did not provide anything close to this life, while the mothers found it difficult to accumulate the money they earned. According to Yenn (2022), people tend to admire the cozy life of rich people, which to the poor seems impossible. Woolf also seems to mesmerize the adorable life characterized by luxury space, and privacy to make one’s decision independently.

3.1 Space and Privacy

Woolf uses the title “A Room of One’s Own” to highlight the significance of giving women a room to enable them to write or compose their ideas. In this context, the word “room” is symbolically used to represent “independence” in general. By fostering their independence, women will be able to utilize their abilities, which will enable them to put their ideas into context (Narayan, 2018). It is the initial stage in enhancing financial independence or autonomy. Financial autonomy is the ability or capacity to decide freely on individual financial affairs, including financial acquisition, management, transfer, allocation, or utilization without external interference (Jensen, 2019). It highlights the hierarchy in which decisions about finances or money have to flow. Woolf insists that, in the male-dominated world, it is necessary to acquire women and according to them independence to operate in a free world like men.

The essay centers the fundamental element towards enhancing financial autonomy, where money and room compel women to exercise their ability to write. It propels Woolf’s thesis by stating that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4) as integral in facilitating independence and financial growth (Woolf, 1929). By stating this, Woolf means that women do not have the free time they need to write, making them more and more independent. According to Woolf, these are essential elements in creating women writers, since they will have the financial ability, environmental space, and freedom to be good writers. It draws the reader to the conclusion that women in Woolf’s era were subject to inferiority and male dominance which has thwarted their chances to rise.

Woolf in her essay “A Room of One’s Own” helps the reader understand the importance of money. Money is the fundamental element that hinders women from having their room or space (Symington, 2018). It also derives the interdependence between money and room, or privacy, since when women have their own room, they have the privacy and space to make their own decisions about how to make money. Woolf indicates the utmost importance and the basic foundation of exercising freedom. According to (Woolf, 1929), the extent to which women are denied their freedom has contracted their ability to earn money and generate financial independence. With one’s own
space, it is easy to have financial autonomy since one can make personal decisions uninterrupted. Money surpasses any other factor in meeting individual aspirations by enhancing financial autonomy. Woolf believed that accumulating wealth is integral to establishing enough dominance and improving one’s status in the community. She stated that between “money and vote” she would rather own money since money is infinitely more important. Many people would concur with the speaker’s assessment about how it would be integral in promoting individual freedom, growth, and knowledge accumulation. With money, it is possible to access or acquire the luxury a person would aspire to, regardless of their position or differences.

4. Conclusion

Woolf uses her piece of writing “A Room of One’s Own” to prove that financial stability is key in setting the tone towards independence and growth. She encourages women and other society members to focus on finding money to foster their financial autonomy. Woolf seemed to be inspiring women’s contribution to society and advocating for women’s support in their quest to achieve financial and intellectual freedom. Woolf’s thought-provoking narratives and arguments have reiterated the importance of financial liberty in nurturing women’s creative agency. Woolf lays the framework for an everlasting conversation about the empowerment that comes with controlling one’s economic resources by uncovering the limits that constrained women’s intellectual pursuits throughout her day. This empowerment, as evidenced by the numerous narratives recounted by contemporary participants, extends beyond literary circles and resonates in the domains of art, academia, and professional life.

References