

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

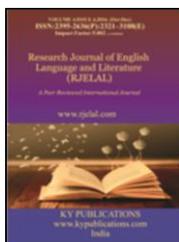
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

VIRGINIA WOOLF: AN ANGEL IN THE HOUSE OR MADWOMAN IN THE ATTIC?

NIRMALA DEVI

Registration No.: 11409913

Lovely Professional University, Punjab(India).



ABSTRACT

The entire article talks about the author Virginia Woolf, a well-known twentieth century's writer. It shows how society give the tag of 'mad woman' to Woolf but she still manages to be an 'angel' to her people. How the life incidents affect her and how she tried to overcome all those moments which put her sanity and authority into question? It talks how all the life incidents like deaths of her loved ones, being assaulted by her brother, her affair with a woman called Vitta Sackville and then being called as a mad woman, affected her mind a lot and how finally she took the decision of suicide. Largely, predominantly her suicide has been glorified so much so, that most critics choose to focus on this anomaly of her death more than her life works. The article's attempt has been to investigate the twin position of Virginia Woolf: as a woman and as a writer and how it is that one finds it exceedingly difficult to overtly generalize the two categories.

Key words: Effect of life incidents, Madness, An angel, Feminism,

©KY PUBLICATIONS

The English novelist, critic and essayist Virginia Woolf ranks as one of the England's most distinguished writers of the middle part of the twentieth century. Woolf started writing when the world was considered largely patriarchal. Women were considered as largely secondary to men. It's the man who is liberal to do anything and to talk about their open views through their writings. But Woolf was too bold to speak about her thoughts freely, either it's the characters of her novel or her personal life. Woolf wrote about the characters without any fear of being liked or disliked. She talks about the feminism through her novels. In her novels most of the time, it's the women who play the role of protagonist. Woolf was breaking the monotony in literature world. Like Jane Austen, Ley George Sand, Samul May, Margaret Fuller are some famous writers of nineteen century, who talked about feminism in their books. But as every success

faces the failure first, Woolf also faced the hurdles in her life. In society people started making a perception of mad woman about Woolf. What adds to her-madwomen status is the ridicule changed on her by society?

It was an attempt to do the manly task of writing and publishing in a man's world. The man of the world, the society, the world, the universe at the large (or so it seemed to Woolf) attempted to brand her into a madwoman because then it would be easier to ignore a mad woman. But at same time she was an angel for her loved ones. The nineteenth century usually saw women in binary roles of angel or madwomen and Charlotte Bronte's 'Jane Eye' further (Bertha Mason) solidified the mad women. However, with Woolf the binary blurs.

Woolf's life is the perfect example for the study.

She is considered as mad women and at same time she is also taken as an angel. As modern

criticism on Woolf has acknowledged, her contribution towards answering the Women's question has been immense.

In general words madness is a state of having serious illness. The term has frequently been used for Woolf. It's not exactly that she is having mental issues but her life incidents which changed her behaviour, she had her own views to look upon life. Woolf was one of the writers whose view of life was conditioned by the forces of their age. Such things portrayed her as a mad woman in the society. The first heartbreak she suffered was her mother's death when she was only thirteen years old. At this stage as criticism has asserted,

She was unsettled by her reactions, when she kissed the face of her mother, she recoiled at its coldness- 'it was like kissing a cold iron'. It was these physical responses rather than her emotional condition that she wrote of in later life. (Webb 14).

It is clear from her family's comments at the time that she was deeply distressed by the loss of her mother, and suffered a prolonged period of emotional disturbance. Her father's letter and her half-sister Stella's diary entries suggest that it took more than a year for her deeply unsettled condition to pass.

She hadn't come out of the breakdown of her mother's death, Woolf felt once more a tremendous sense of loss, this time combined with feelings of guilt and bewilderment at this second blow of death. Woolf was only fifteen when her sister Stella died. After the death of Woolf's mother, it was Stella who was taking care of her as a mother. Woolf had a high temperature, and so stayed in Stella's home and was nursed by her. These were two back to back heartbreaks which affected Woolf's mental and physical situation.

When a person suffers from heartbreaks he/she should need to interact people so that the person can come out of his/her sorrows. The fetters of Victorian Society, in which Woolf grew up didn't provide much scope for a female child to pursue wisdom and knowledge in any concrete or organized form, and she took her formal education at her home. But her brother Thoby had become a boarder at Clifton College in Bristol and Adrian had entered

Westminster School. They came home with tales and stories and Woolf who had not shared much intellectual part with others, used to listen to her brothers. Woolf also interacted with his brother's friend when they come home, this is the time when Woolf got to interact with people, outside her home. "Woolf's studies were less structured than, and in her opinion inferior to, those of her brothers-social and family life were thought to be more important for girls than intellectual achievement." (Webb 16)

There were such incidents which affected Woolf a lot, as a result Woolf began to experience headaches and hear voices, she spoke incoherently, and soon she lost touch with the reality of those around her. During her illness, even her bond with Vanessa was broken.

Sir George Savage, who had been a friend of their father and was a specialist in mental disorders, took charge of her treatment. She refused to eat and had to be cared by three nurses, all of whom she hated. Her delusions continued: she heard the birds outside her window singing in Greek; the king, too, was outside the window- amongst the azaleas, not singing but using foul language. Eventually, she made a feeble attempt at suicide by throwing herself from the window but it was not high enough for her to do herself any real harm." (Webb 21)

As Time passing the madness of Woolf is increasing day by day. She was all lost in her own imaginative world. Then a time comes when she was kept under the eyes of three nurses. But Woolf don't listen them and behaves out of control, which sometimes irritated the nurses and they started disliking Woolf. This madness neither decreasing nor goes away. Being surrounded by three nurses and having to spend her time inside the four walls of her house, creating more delusions in her mind. Then a point came when she thought of suicide. The decision of suicide scared Woolf's husband. To divert her mind and make her happy Leonard did so many efforts. But Woolf found happiness only in writings.

Writings gave peace to her mind. Woolf's father Sir Leslie Stephen was an English author,

critic, historian, biographer and mountaineer. She got inspiration of writing from her father or we can say it's in her blood. Woolf began writing professionally in 1900. She wrote so many novels and essays. But to write or convey her thoughts in man oriented world is not easy. While writing she locked herself in room and stayed there for days. She always feels conscious during the publications of her novels. Will public like it? What would be the response of public? Then again she caged herself in her room. Most of the characters she wrote in her novels are related to the incidents of her life, as she wrote about Septimus Warren Smith in her novel *Mrs Dalloway* who doubles up as a doppelganger of Woolf herself. A character who is not easily understood.

Septimus is a shell-shocked World War 1 soldier. He's a unique figure in literature because he was one of the first characters to show the horrors of war and the trauma that occurs after combat. Woolf doesn't depict him as a hero, but rather as suffer and survivor-another sort of casualty of war. Septimus is plagued by feelings of numbness hallucinations of his friend's death, and a desperate urge to communicate something about crime and beauty." (Shmoop 1)

The character Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* was a result of Woolf's own condition during the death of her mother. Whatever Woolf faced, the breakdown and hallucinations, she portrayed the character Septimus Warren Smith. The character, the incidents, how the character feeling in the novel is that what Woolf faced and felt in her life.

There's a time came when Woolf's madness was at its peak. It was not a single thing which making her insane, the continuous heart breaks, deaths one after another in her family, sexual assault by her brothers, the Multiple bouts of depression as we can read in the article of numerous suicide attempts and one day she was suicide. Woolf think it's one's life; they can take the decision of living or leaving of their life. According to her one should die to keep the balance of life. She ended her life.

But this is not the only thing about Woolf, like every coin has two side Woolf was also a warm hearted lady. She was like other ladies who take care of their home and her relations. So the word angel talked about her caring heart.

The term angel signifies a good character, which help others or come in existence to love others. But in Woolf's time period angel is counted as the one who cares about their family, their belonging. The one who obey the rules and never questions.

Woolf was an angel to the literature world. "The study shows how Woolf employed her novels to show women the way to obtain meaning in life and realize their identities. Virginia Woolf established herself as a distinguished feminist woman writer in her treatment of women's helpless situation. She unveiled the causes of women's oppression and provided us with a comprehensive answer for the women 's question". (Shihada 1)

It's her who changed the point of view of the society about novels. She broke the monotony. Her novel shows the struggle of women. She helped building the modern literature. Such things make her an angel in literature world. The hero of her novels isn't a man, it's a woman who is leading her novels.

Woolf loved Vita Sackville and for Vita, Woolf is an angel. Vita wrote in her letter for Woolf"

Always, Always, Always I try to say what I feel, I missed you. I do miss you. I shall miss you. And if you don't believe it, you're a long eared owl and ass...Open the top bottom of your jersey and you will see, nestling inside, a lively squirrel with the most inquisitive habits, but a dear creature all the same (D IV, 132)

In her diary Woolf described Sackville- West on their first meeting in 1923 as "a pronounced sapphist...Snob as I am, I trace her passions- 500 years back, & they become romantic to me, like old yellow wine." Woolf was ten years than Sackville – west, and seemed to feel inferior to her lover."

Vita shines in the grocer's shop in Sevenoaks...pink glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung...There is her maturity and full-breastedness: her being so much in

full sail on the high tides, where I am coasting down backwaters; her capacity I mean to take the floor in any company, to represent her country, to visit Chatsworth, to control silver, servants, chow dogs; her motherhood...her in short (what I have never been) a real woman.

The two had other lovers, and Woolf, "as the older woman in the relationship," the Virginia Woolf blog writes, felt "unwanted and dowdy" as Sackville-West strayed. But though the love affair ended, it not only produced a close friendship, but a novel, Woolf's Orlando, which Vita's son Nigel called "the longest and most charming love letter in literature."

The love between these two were really intense.

The bond between Woolf and her husband Leonard was very strong. Woolf loved her husband a lot and Leonard took every action to make her feel good. Before Woolf took the action of death she wrote a letter to her husband, which shows the strong bond of their relationship. Her last letter is not a farewell to the world at large, but rather to a trusted friend and lover.

"Dearest,

I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that – everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer.

I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been."

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf who is considered one of England's most distinguished writers of the middle part of the twentieth century. Woolf's life is very interesting and mysterious too. She had been through so many phases of life. She was different from others because of her thoughts, her ways of observation, and her open relationship with Vita Sackville. Woolf always took relationships seriously either it's with her sister, her mother, and her love Vita or her husband Leonard. After the death of her mother Woolf went through a heartbreak, she hadn't recover yet, and another breakdown came with the death of her half-sister, after this her father died too.

These incidents plagued by periodic mood swings and associated illnesses. She didn't get the formal education like her brothers and throughout her life and across her writings we see Woolf lamenting this fact. She started being counted as a 'madwoman' because of her irregular behaviour. As a result, Woolf began to experience headaches and hear voices, she spoke incoherently, and soon she lost touch with the reality of those around her. She was always conscious about the reviews of her books. She caged herself in her room for many days. All of these things ascribing her image of a madwoman in the society.

Apart from all this she keeps a place of an angel in the hearts of her loved one. She loved them unconditionally. Reading about her life we can see the bond between her and her husband. Before taking the step of suicide she wrote a last letter to her husband, it wasn't a farewell to the world but a last letter to recall the good moments she had spent with her husband.

The attempt of this article has been to look into the multifarious ways in which Virginia Woolf has been appreciated or apprehended in latest criticism. Her dual personality and the rich mine of critical tenet that arrives from there is resultant of how well literature can be treated as an associated art form. Unlike other writers, Woolf's personal life has been just as much a matter of interest for researchers. The dichotomy between angel and

madwoman has assailed a century of literature, as is clearly visible in Victorian Literature. With the advent of Modernism and Virginia Woolf, the dichotomy spans out from fiction to fact and becomes doubly interesting in its wake.

Work Cited

Brooks, Rebecca Beatrice "The Marriage of Virginia and Leonard Woolf". The Virginia Woolf Blog; the Life and Legacy of Virginia Woolf: N.P. 13.02.2012. Web.20April.2016 (n.d.). <http://virginiawoolfblog.com/the-marriage-of-virginia-and-leonard-woolf/>

McNEILLIE, Andrew "Bloomsbury". The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf; Edited by Susan Sellers: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge: The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom. Web. 14April.2016 (n.d.)

Shihada, Islam M. "A Feminist Perspective of Virginia Woolf's Selected Novels: Mrs Dalloway and to the Lighthouse". Assist Professor, Department of English, Faculty, of Education and Human, Science, Al-Aqsa University.

Web references

googleweblight.com/?lite_url=http://www.shmoop.com/mrs-dalloway/septimus-warren-smith.html&ei=bk7zKaan&lc=en-IN&s=1&m=353&host=www.google.co.in&ts=1480322541&sig=AF9NedmvbxR5AFFazL2UeNvNg9JExCRkhg

www.culture.com/2016/07/the-steamy-love-letters-of-virginia-woolf-and-vita-sackville-west-1925-1929.html, Accessed, 25.11.2016.

Ruth. Virginia Woolf: The British Library Writers' Lives. London: 2008. Print