

Virginia Woolf's Postcolonial Feminism

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When in 1928 she is invited to deliver a series of lectures on the relation between Women and Fiction, Virginia Woolf feels she is asked to talk about something that is not there. Looking for a spotlight on this something that is not there, she resorts to fiction because, as she asserts, the work of the imagination on this subject is likely to contain "more truth fact" (Woolf 1977, 6). She therefore introduces a fictional character, the writer Mary Carmichael, and has her explore the history and conceivable future of female readership and authorship. By undertaking her briefs in this way, Woolf is able to play out the whole gamut of aspects related to this theme at once. Ever since this path-breaking lecture series, which in essay form came to be known as *A Room of One's Own*, nearly everyone asked to say something about the female voice in literature has turned to Woolf's comprehensive and masterly essay. Whether it is Gilbert and Gubar (1979), who over 30 years ago established Anglo-American feminist literary criticism in academia, or the Dutch literary critic Marja Pruis (2011) who targeted a larger audience with a collection of essays titled *Kus me, straf me* (Kiss me, castigate me) that was shortlisted for the AKO Literature Prize: time and again female critics not afraid of using the F-word unanimously evoke Virginia Woolf's visionary manifest. It is not just that cultural critics continue to refer to Woolf's essay for its content; the form she chose for presenting her programme – telling a story, explicitly introducing the imagination to make visible what is unseen – has inspired many. Not the least among the world's authors would later reiterate and refine that form. Thus John Coetzee held his much discussed Tanner lectures at Princeton by introducing the fictional character of Elizabeth Costello, an animal activist who lectures on the ethical aspects of relationships between humans and animals today (Coetzee 1999), while recently Marlene van Niekerk in her inaugural lecture here in Utrecht presented a fictional traveller who in passing unfolds a poetics of the novel (Van Niekerk 2009).

Yet Woolf's insights, as she unfolded them in the 1920s for the female students at Cambridge, were not exactly appreciated at the time. Indeed, her exposition was received with much yawning. A Cambridge student at the time wrote in her diary: "Had a lecture by Mrs Woolf – very boring." Another former student recalled: "I must admit that her appearance made a much more lasting impression on me than anything she said." And one last witness to this historic event remembers especially Woolf's lilting voice in the warm dusky hall and confesses to Woolf biographer Hermione Lee: "I am deeply ashamed to confess that I slept right through it. If only I had known it was to become *A Room of One's Own*!" (Lee 1997, 565).

In other words, Hermione Lee argues, Woolf's lecture on Women and Fiction did not at the time appear to contain the stuff legends are made of. And that, as I would like to add, probably had as much to do with form as with content. Truly innovative ideas have the ability not only to intervene at the level of content, but also at the level of structures, the level of genres and institutions that establish and legitimise content. It takes time for the effect of such far-reaching interventions to mature. A lot of time. Centuries sometimes ... So, I too will pull a thread from the complex argument woven by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, to eventually tie it to what has happened since in feminist cultural criticism. In doing so, I hope to show what kind of knowledge could emerge from being sensitive to what is not there; a sensitivity Woolf as well as subsequent feminist theory have taught us. In particular, I hope to show that critical practice is

not fully deployed as a knowledge-producing instrument if the feminist and postcolonial perspectives on the Humanities are omitted.

There are actually two major programmatic issues in Woolf's pamphlet. The first concerns the observation that there is no tradition of thinking about the life and work of women from a historical perspective. For example, during her strolls in London, Woolf sees a lot of monuments but they all refer to a history in which not a single woman is in sight. That symbolic fact alone ensures that she will always feel she is trespassing as soon as she closes the door behind her. This relates to Woolf's second programmatic issue: since there is no tradition available that allows women a position in the public sphere as a matter of course, women must explicitly situate themselves in the world through fiction, by using their imagination. This act of situating oneself does not merely concern catching up, supplementing a history that is largely unwritten, but also and especially so analysing the forces that structure that history. The economy, war, nation building; these are phenomena that on the surface appear perhaps to be primarily the domain of men – our history books show us a coming and going of kings, princes and generals occasionally interspersed with nameless labourers, servants and soldiers – but, as Woolf demonstrates in her essay, such factors that have constituted society are intertwined with a constellation of gender specific conventions and power relations that concern women too.

This, the analysis of how gender is interlaced with local and global politics, goes infinitely beyond the mantra for which *A Room of One's Own* became known and that famously argued that women need a room of their own (i.e. the possibility of seclusion and concentration) as well as an income if they want to commit themselves to being an author. But precisely this mantra, a room and an income, when read through the lens of the interweaving of the personal and the political, acquires a dimension that so far has been overlooked in the reception of the essay. It is no coincidence that Woolf's fictional author inherits from an aunt. It is this legacy that makes her economically independent. And, as we know from the mantra, economic independence is one of the decisive factors in the development of authorship. However, there is a snake in the grass of Woolf's fictional author's economic independence. I quote: "My aunt, Mary Beton, I must tell you, died by a fall from her horse when she was out riding to take the air in Bombay" (Woolf 1977, 37).

The contemporary postcolonial feminist critic cannot really fail to interpret this sign. Here a legacy features, not of any one aunt, but an aunt in Bombay! Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, who aspired to autonomy and who of course figures in Woolf's essay while also frequently speaking up in the works of Gilbert and Gubar up to Marja Pruis, likewise acquired her economic independence due to a lucky break from the British colonies. *Jane Eyre* had an uncle in Madeira who at a decisive moment in her life leaves her a legacy, thus providing her with the means to engage in marriage with the somewhat destitute but still well-off Rochester as an economically independent woman. Taking to task feminist readings of *Jane Eyre*, including that of the aforementioned Gilbert and Gubar, the post-colonial critic Gayatri Spivak (1985) reminded her readers of the fact that the fulfilment of Jane's desire for a connection that would not entail the loss of material autonomy had been enabled by Britain's colonial ties. Not only is Jane's economic independence funded by a fortune accumulated in the British colonies, on top of that she owes her psychological maturity to the creole Bertha Mason's expulsion from the narrative. This protagonist is Gilbert and Gubar's proverbial madwoman in the attic, whose colonial history is obscured in the novel and who by setting herself on fire is ousted from the plot as soon as the story or *Bildung* of Jane can do without her. Spivak notes (but for example Toni Morrison (1992) did the same in *Playing in the Dark*) that this – the black contextless Other as a foil to the development of a white, rational self – is a *Bildung* structure on which the western

autonomous subject in general is based and in which both men and women are implied in a gender-specific manner. The white, western, middleclass subject arises, becomes a self, by means of marginalising the history of the colonial other (Spivak 1985). Such laying bare of the interweaving of personal *Bildung* with the domain of politics enacts feminist and postcolonial literary criticism at a level that causes many a benevolent critic to quit with the remark: for a start, let us talk about the practice of femininity and masculinity, which is already sufficiently complicated, rather than taking issue with the whole kit and caboodle at once. Yet, Spivak's reading of Brontë and her analysis of the first stages of Jane Eyre's reception in feminism do show the extent to which the discourse of masculinity and femininity is inextricably bound up with the politics of nationhood and ethnicity. To speak about women and men is to speak about the gender specific aspects of citizenship, class, and ethnicity.

This is not only an important axiom in Spivak's criticism of Second Wave feminism. It seems that the narrative of Woolf's fictional author addresses these intersections explicitly already at the time of first-wave feminism. The news about the aunt in Bombay is directly linked to another historical fact that constitutes female subjectivity in the next sentence: "The news of my legacy reached me one night about the same time that the act was passed that gave votes to women" (Woolf 1977, 37). Most likely, it is not without meaning that the fictional author in Woolf's essay receives her legacy from the colonies together with the right to vote. Being the middleclass white woman that she is, the access this fictional author gains to British citizenship is accompanied by the whole gamut of colonial connotations. Nineteenth century England, in other words, can excel in rationality, emancipation, and progressiveness also because of the identity constitutive conquest of British India. Woolf drew that connection 1928. She saw something that not many people saw with her with so explicitly. And we in turn need a postcolonial feminist sensitivity to see these two signs as extremely meaningful in the constitution of white female authorship.

References

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