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**No Room of One's Own: Rethinking the Idea of Female Domestic Space in India during the Pandemic of COVID -19 through Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own***

**Aditi Behl**

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**Abstract**

Women have fought for their right to have their space: physical, intellectual and political. Privacy is important for women; to think, to create and just to rest from hours of paid and unpaid (domestic) labour. Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own*, argues for this space. Through a Marxist lens, she argued that for women to end patriarchal hegemony they need to re-write their own 'fiction' (their narratives), and for that, they need money and space. But today, amid the pandemic, one's need for their own room has become extremely significant. The idea of self-quarantining, however, remains a privilege in countries, like India, due to its massive population and extreme poverty. And this leads to a very important question, has the pandemic robbed women of their personal space and privacy in their households, more than ever? The present pandemic has forced us to rethink the politics of postcolonial feminism and how women find themselves in conflict with their limiting space. The pressing problems in the postcolonial world such as domestic abuse, lack of financial independence and education, a huge family and unending domestic labour, have been heightened in the pandemic. Thus, Woolf's call for space (both physical and political) for women is significant. In this paper, I would like to analyse how the pandemic has affected the domestic space of women in India, through Woolf's politics of feminism. And perhaps how there will be a need to re-define the politics of postcolonial feminism, post the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Third world feminism, Virginia Woolf, Space politics, Gender Roles.

**Introduction**

Over the centuries, women have fought for their right to have their space: physical, intellectual and political. Privacy is important for women; to think, to create and just to rest from hours of paid and unpaid (domestic) labour. Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own* argues for this autonomous space. Through a Marxist lens, she argued that for women to end patriarchal hegemony, they need to re-write their own 'fiction' that is their own narratives and for that, they need money and space. But today, amid the pandemic of COVID-19, one's need for their own room has become extremely significant. The idea of self-quarantining, however, remains a privilege in countries, like India, due to its massive population and extreme poverty. And this leads to a very important question, has the pandemic robbed women of their personal space and privacy in their households, more than ever? The present pandemic has forced us to rethink the politics of postcolonial feminism and how women find themselves in conflict with their limiting space. The pressing problems in

# **No Room of One's Own: Rethinking the Idea of Female Domestic Space in India during the Pandemic of COVID -19 through Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own***

the postcolonial world, such as domestic abuse, lack of financial independence and education, a huge family, have been heightened in the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. Thus, Woolf's call for space (both physical and political) for women is significant.

In this paper, I would like to firstly study Woolf's idea of space in Victorian society, and then with that context, I would like to analyse how the pandemic has affected the domestic space of women in India. I would also like to question the concept of 'home' and the domestic spaces with the context of Indian households and question how perhaps there is an impending need to redefine them.

## **1. *A Room of One's Own* and its Historical Context and the Idea of Space**

### **1.1 Virginia Woolf and Victorian Feminism**

Virginia Woolf was a twentieth century public intellectual who voiced her opinion about various issues related to class, culture, education and primarily gender. The late 19th and early 20th century was a period of gender crisis. There were rapid shifts in social, domestic and political roles- especially for women. Sally Alexander argues in her essay, "Room of One's Own: 1920s Feminist Utopias" that Woolf's essay is historically important and connected to the feminist politics of the 1920s. Alexander sees the room which Woolf imagines as a product of multiple spaces that Woolf experienced in the early 20th century, namely, "a Bloomsbury drawing room, a south London slum" (Alexander, 2000, p. 273). The Post-war world for women was dramatically different. Having served in the war, women couldn't just go back to their domestic spaces and thus, they continued to work which led to women's need for new institutions such as birth control clinics, mother and child clinics, and white-collar women's trade unions. Women's inclusion in the profession changed the norm, for instance, psychoanalysis paid closer attention to what women had to say. There was a curiosity which motivated the entire century about the 'woman question,' about the social, philosophical, psychological and biological status of women.

Woolf started her work in the field of gender politics significantly in 1910 along with the suffragist cause. She extended her support for Women's right to vote but later on realised that the struggles for women's vote were primarily too narrow a cause in the battle of gender inequality. It is thus important to read *Room* in the light of the suffrage movement notably and one of the effects of post-suffrage feminism was that the experiences of the working-class women were being recorded and published, often by themselves. Thus, in many ways, women were creating their own literary and historical tradition. In such a scenario, Woolf's demand for an autonomous space was a wish for freedom, "a wish for an individual Utopia," and this wish for isolation was a result of the modern idea of the times of the importance of thinking (Alexander, 2000, p. 275). The room was a fight against suffocation and claustrophobia into which women were forced to be in by restricting them into conversation of the "common sitting room" (Woolf, 1929, p. 93). In many ways, the room stands symbolic of a rejection "of the nightmare of forced domestic life- a dystopia fictionalized in Ibsen's *The Doll's House* (1888) and Cecily Hamilton's *Marriage is a Trade* (1909), and ...Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892)" (Alexander, 2000, p. 276).

### **1.2 Idea of Space in *A Room of One's Own***

The spatial metaphor of the 'room' in *A Room of One's Own* is a political metaphor which symbolises both the public space that women were denied but also the mental agency of a 'thinking woman'. The right to private space is a privilege because spaces are hierarchical

and gendered. Thus, with *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf also brought in a questioning of the capitalist patriarchy. According to Woolf, it is only when women are able to provide themselves an autonomous space, it is only then when they can have political and economic agency. The concept of space and modes of production has been a crucial relationship and has been studied by many Marxist critics. One of them being, Henri Lefebvre who in his book, *The Production of Space*, has argued that space is not a pre-existing and unchanging container which is occupied by people. Instead, it is 'produced' by the people. The term 'production' is significant, "Every society and hence every mode of production...produces a space, its own space", he says (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 31). Thus, social relations, including levels of inequality and exploitation, are also deeply implicated in the production of space. In a capitalist mode of production, certain spaces would be public spaces which are charged for entry and some would be private spaces which would 'belong' to individuals.

Michele Foucault also problematizes the idea of space. He talks about the production of space in terms of clinics, factories and prison houses and argues that space is always a means of exercising power. Production of spaces, according to him, is not a neutral practice but a deliberate attempt to implement hierarchies by structures of power and knowledge. This is because space has a social function and properties which determine how the person inhabiting is supposed to act while in it. Feminist scholars have further studied this correlation between space and power and have argued how domestic and private spaces are gendered and are created to control or limit women's mobility. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* suggests a link between gender and space. Butler argues that space is almost always gendered. She says, "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 179). She argues how gender is a performative act and not a stable identity. This performance is enabled in an external space which acts as some form of a "cultural inscription" (Butler, 1990, p. 186).

Through, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf has potently suggested that women have lacked agency because they have been denied free excess to space. Julie Robin Solomon, in this context, argues in her essay (1989), "Staking ground: The politics of space in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*" that "Through inheritance, property becomes tradition, venerable, an institution" (p. 333). And this is what Woolf aims for, a female tradition, which authorises their historical and political agency via economic possession. Woolf's persona Mary Beton/Seton, dreams of having this agency through her mother's capitalist property. She argues, "If only Mrs Seton and her mother and her mother before her had learnt the great art of making money and had left their money, like their fathers and their grandfathers before them, to found fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex..." (Woolf, 1929, p. 16). Thus, Woolf's call for a 'room' is not a simple call for just a space for leisure and isolation but also a questioning of the essential structures of exclusion and inclusion in a patriarchal society and how it denies an agency to a 'thinking woman.' At this point, it is important to bring the same question which Woolf asks in the *Room*, "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (Woolf, 1929, p. 18). And indeed, it is perhaps the worst to be denied agency.

## 2. Third World Woman

### 2.1 Conceptualisation

For the purpose of understanding the *Room* in the context of India, it is important to

## **No Room of One's Own: Rethinking the Idea of Female Domestic Space in India during the Pandemic of COVID -19 through Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own***

understand the politics of the so-called 'Third World woman' and differentiate it with western feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) defines the Third World geographically in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, "The nation-states of Latin America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-east Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania constitute the parameters of the non-European third world. In addition, black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous peoples in the U.S., Europe, Australia, some of whom have historic links with the geographically defined third worlds, also define themselves as third world peoples" (p. 5). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains the concept of formation of the third world with the Bandung Conference in 1955. The conceptualisation of the third world was symbolic of a 'third way' which was neither associated with the western or eastern bloc to stand independently, nor being caught up with the politics of the two superpowers. In some way, the 'third world' countries aimed to define themselves in the resistance to the colonial experience. However, with the economic and social development across the world, the definition of the third world changed. KumKum Sangari has argued that the third world can no more be defined merely geographically but also an imaginary space which is defined by its economy, sociological and cultural changes. She is critical of the usage of the term by the west because the construction or rather the misconstruction of the 'third world', according to her, is a deliberate attempt to club the hugely diverse countries and dismiss them easily as an 'underdeveloped terrain' (Sangari, 1999, p. 217).

### **2.2 Problems with 'First World Feminism'**

The primary problem that 'third world feminism' has with western feminism (keeping in mind that there is no single feminism in the west, as well) is that it confines their own 'feminisms' into a monolithic identity and confines it to merely gender discrimination. And this is primarily done with the mode of creation of discourse and knowledge. Like Foucault in *Power/Knowledge*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her essay, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," has argued that scholarship is not merely an innocent distribution of knowledge but a political practice which forms an ideology. This is so because the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas is symbolic of political agency. However, recent scholars have argued how this clubbing together is not acceptable and have worked on creating their own discourse. Thus, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in the introduction to *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, argue that due to diverse cultural practices and complicated hierarchical societal structure of the 'third world,' its feminism cannot be singular. Any attempt at "theoretical generalization" would put the idea at the "risk [of] both simplification and rigidity" (Sangari, 1999, p. 1). Thus, they reject the western idea of 'third world' and feminism and call for a more flexible idea.

Thus, in many senses, the politics of Woolf in *Room* cannot be applied to the 'third world' feminism but it does help in starting a discourse of its own. Sumanta Banerjee, in his essay, "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal" provides an interesting correlation between middle class women in Bengal and Victorian women of England. He argues that just like how Victorian women were pushed into the seclusion of the private sphere as a symbol of leisure and affluence, similarly Bengali women were tied into the "cultural homogenisation of the Bengali *bhadralok*," which was done as a result of a need of a new economic market which could cater to the newly emerging upper middle class as an impact of the colonial rule (Banerjee, 1999, p. 11). These women were restricted to private domestic spaces like "*pujas, utsavs*, religious festivals, and ritual social functions like marriage" (Banerjee, 1999, p. 12). The upper middle-class women were denied from public

spaces. The only women who were allowed in public spaces were those from urban areas who were women from lower strata or prostitutes and courtesans. Thus, there is a clear demarcation of private and public spaces in terms of a 'good' or a 'bad' woman, or in Woolf's terminology, the angel in the house. In many ways, postcolonial India imbibed the Victorian virtues of its colonial ruler.

### **2.3 Division between Public and Private Space**

In many ways, this divide between private and public spaces continues to exist for women in India. In a comparatively modern society, the 21st century India continues to restrict its 'new' women into spaces and deny them political agency to their own body. Modern working middle class women are still juggling in the interstitial space between domestic and professional life. Even if they are financially independent, their finances most of the time are controlled by the patriarch in the family. Even when they can make their decisions, they lack the agency to do so. So, Woolf's argument of mere financial stability and a control over capital does not really suffice, in the context of the 'new, Indian woman. However, again the concept of 'room' can be re-interpreted to argue that what these women want is not just a physical space to call their own but a stability in the society which legitimises their experiences. For too long they have existed in the ambiguous space of being both the bread-earner and the care-taker. Their labour, whether professional or domestic, is more than often dismissed. For instance, domestic labour by women in India is recounted as something which is their 'duty' as a 'good' woman. This advocacy of domestic labour as 'duty' is not an innocent practice. It is a deliberate attempt in a capitalist patriarchal society where women are expected to take care of the family both physically and emotionally. It is thus imperative that gender roles be redefined and responsibilities are reshuffled. Women should not be restricted to be mere bearers of the so-called Indian tradition and honour.

## **3. Gendering the Domestic Space**

### **3.1 Paid Domestic Labour**

To understand the importance of domestic space in the economic mode of society we have to acknowledge that there is a deliberate invisibilisation of women's work. India has one of the largest gender pay gaps. According to the Monster Salary Index (MSI) on gender for 2016, women in India earn 25% less than men. Apart from a professional space in modern societies, women have to also take care of traditional house care. Women have been systematically marginalised and while their domestic labour has been deemed as trivial or not so significant, in fact, the labour is very important. The United Nations Report on the World Social Situation 2016 points out at an important statistic where it shows how over 51% of the work done by women is unpaid, and is not counted in the nation's GDP and other statistics. This is important because it can be observed that women's labour is delegitimized legally. While so-called 'liberal' families 'allow' the women in their house to go out and work, but maintaining the house and child care is considered a woman's duty. This work is not even considered 'real' work mostly by men who continue to have benefit from it. The labour involved in household care is not only physical but also emotional and mental, because apart from cleaning, cooking, childcare, elderly care, it can also include providing mental stability to their family members by often compromising their own needs.

The unpaid domestic labour often also leads to disruption of women's professional life for which they are unable to afford time or energy, leaving them financially dependent on the men in their family. Anindita Sengupta (2016) in her case study, "Measurement of Unpaid Household Work of Women in India: A Case Study of Hooghly District of West Bengal" argues that the domestic labour "impacts negatively on the health and wellbeing of

## **No Room of One's Own: Rethinking the Idea of Female Domestic Space in India during the Pandemic of COVID -19 through Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own***

women, further compromising their ability to participate in economic, social and political spheres” (p. 3). Sengupta also points out that even the paid work is considered “supplementary work” and dismissed as of no value and in addition to that she has to face the brunt of the “double burden of working hours” leading to loss of her leisure time (Sengupta, 2016, p. 4). Her case study proves that empirically women spend more than twice the time on domestic work than men. Apart from that, it should be recognised that women's unpaid domestic labour is the bedrock of most capitalist societies. Moreover, education and employment in the name of women's empowerment will mean nothing until and unless we change the way we perceive domestic labour and women's right to space and agency. This can be proved by statistics reports which suggest despite economic and educational growth, female participation in the labour force of India has fallen to 24% in 2011, from 31% in 2004.

The United Nation has estimated that the unpaid labour done by women globally can be recounted as 13% of the GDP. And in India this estimation is 39% of its GDP. However, to understand the politics of labour it is also important to understand the politics of space. As already mentioned about the dynamics of power and space in the section 1.2, the domestic space which women inhabit is also constructed around hierarchy and power. Women's spaces are very rare and few to call their own. And when they inhabit spaces, they usually inhabit it as mothers and homemakers. Whereas there are numerous male spaces which are symbolic of power, where they can make important decisions. The presence of men and absence of women in particular spaces is made ‘natural’. For instance, in most Indian households the inner parts of the house near the kitchen are made exclusive for women whereas the outermost parts are for men to inhabit. The women occupy more performative spaces while men are passive and expect to be ‘served’.

### **3.2 Domestic Spaces in the Households**

It is also observed how most households will have an exclusive study room for the patriarch in the house which is usually restricted for entry by other members of the family while he works. His work is naturally deemed productive and more important as compared to the domestic labour of the woman in the house who provides for him and the rest of the family. Moreover, the concept of privacy is also important because the male patriarch can retreat to his private space and the woman is expected to guard his privacy. Now the notion of the ‘room’ which Woolf had offered serves as a potent political metaphor for women because it emphasizes how the personal is indeed political. This particular need for an autonomous space is thus not just a plea for spatial freedom but also mental freedom which symbolises psychological privacy. Woolf (1929) asserts that there is a need for the right to “freedom to think of things in themselves” (p. 33). The room is enabling a space to speak, to think, to create and event to rest from hours of paid and unpaid labour. The room which symbolises privacy is a basic right. It shouldn't be a privilege. It is not necessarily a physical space to call one's own but an agency to belong and to exist as an independent thinking human who can make their own decisions without compromising on their own needs. Claiming privacy also means claiming subjectivity.

## **4. Pandemic of Covid-19 and its Impact on Women's spaces**

The Corona virus pandemic which struck us globally in March 2020 has been rightfully called the worst crisis to hit us in the 21st century. Apart from being a deadly health crisis which has taken lives across the world, the pandemic has impacted the world economically, culturally and politically. The pandemic has in many ways magnified all the existing

loopholes and inequalities in the society. In the middle of the global pandemic where the world is facing a massive crisis, what is being side-lined is the ongoing gender crisis. Some modern thinkers have gone to the extent to suggest how the corona virus pandemic is a disaster for feminism. It is being suggested that the current health crisis has shifted the care giving roles back to women like in the 19th and 20th century. More women have been restricted to care-giving roles at home, where they often juggle between the paid ‘work-from-home’ and unpaid domestic labour. So, in many ways, women have been forced to bear a double burden. The pandemic has changed the way we view space and has also magnified the question of gender roles since most of the family is forced to ‘quarantine’ together.

One of the measures that most countries took was enforcing a lockdown which required citizens to quarantine. India observed a strict lockdown from 25th March to 31st May during which citizens except ‘essential’ workers were legally not allowed to leave their houses unless essential utilities were required. But what went unnoticed during the entire lockdown was some sort of a ‘shadow pandemic’ which has recently been reported by the United Nations. Shadow Pandemic refers to the increase in crime against women and children which is usually left unreported because of the global crisis. In the middle of a pandemic and enforced lockdown, women (both financially independent and dependent) had no choice but to confine themselves with their abusers. Vulnerable both outside and inside the house, women were left helpless and at mercy to their abusers. It should also be noted that the economic crisis also led to loss of jobs which has especially hit women harder. Moreover, India being a poorer country has led to confinement of the family in smaller places sometimes with no mode of communication with the outer world. Electricity and internet connection are especially a privilege for most women in India and thus the numerous government help lines which have been created prove to be inefficient.

The rise in domestic violence during the lockdown of corona virus pandemic depicts how the newer changed conditions have led to a new challenge for third world feminism. Domestic violence has always been a cause of concern. The National Crime Records Bureau of 2018 data shows how domestic violence tops crimes against women, with the “majority of the cases being registered under 'cruelty by husband or his relatives' at 31.9%. This was followed by 'assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty' at 27.6%. The cases of the 'kidnapping and abduction of women stood at 22.5% and the rape cases comprised 10.3% of the overall crime figures”<sup>1</sup>. However, during the pandemic, the National Commission of Women as of 3 April 2020, has reported a rise in various offences against women have increased from 116 to 257. And particularly the rise in domestic violence has increased from 30 to 69. The pandemic in many ways has exaggerated the crimes against women owing their vulnerable position. Women are stuck in a toxic environment in which their domestic labour is expected of them and they also have to face domestic abuse while being forced to share their so-called ‘safe’ home with their abuser. The men in the deeply patriarchal are usually very coercive and controlling and there is hardly any escape route for women, thus impacting their mental and physical health. In such a case it becomes important to ask, how safe it is actually to stay at home.

It is obvious that in terms of crisis, the marginalised become more vulnerable. Thus, a special attention should also be paid to the diverse nature of women in India and the different strata of hierarchies and patriarchies they face. Women living with disabilities, women from minority religious communities, LGBT+ individuals, Dalit women and sex workers, have been drastically impacted and in many different levels. There also have been instances where the people with disabilities facing abuse have chosen to remain silent in fear of being abandoned by the family. In addition to that, the sex workers in Mumbai, Kolkata and

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<sup>1</sup>National Herald 2020

## **No Room of One's Own: Rethinking the Idea of Female Domestic Space in India during the Pandemic of COVID -19 through Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own***

Madhya Pradesh, as reported, have received no assistance from the government, and have barely any money to get by, feed their families, and buy medicines. Sex workers usually live in cramped spaces and more susceptible to the virus and some of them suffering from HIV/AIDS, are most vulnerable to the disease. The brothel being the 'home' of the sex workers is not a safe space in any way to occupy and their abuse is not even recounted as domestic abuse.

There is an invisibilisation of domestic violence at home. The 'room' which Woolf fights for in the 19th century has become in some ways a place to escape from, where women are more vulnerable than ever. The concept of home and domesticity has to be redefined in the new normal because the home is not providing a safe space anymore. The abuse is not just physical but also at a mental level. Manipulation, gas lighting and verbal threats also count as domestic abuse. Women working like essential workers, like frontline health care workers like doctors and nurses who are undoing through the worst burden, are expected to also provide care to the family, being barred from domestic help owing to the lockdown. In addition to that, since women are considered primary caregivers, the physical or emotional issues of family members become women's sole responsibility. Thus, it has become important to read the pandemic through a gender lens to understand and resolve the ongoing 'shadow' pandemic as well.

### **5. Pandemic as a Portal: Conclusion**

Arundhati Roy recently commented, in an article titled "The Pandemic is a Portal" in *The Financial Times*, on the impact of the corona virus pandemic and the insight is rather a hopeful one. She acknowledges the drastic effects on gender but also suggests how the pandemic is a "is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy, April 2020). She argues how the pandemic has enlarged the prevalent inequalities in the society but at the same time she believes that the pandemic has also brought things into focus. She says, "We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it" (Roy, April 2020). It should be realised that the pandemic also brought the middle-class family in close proximity leading to, in some cases, a distribution of responsibilities. There was an acknowledgement of the unequal distribution of burden among households. From here on, it is necessary to work on this acknowledgement and work on reducing the inequality in domestic spaces.

Apart from this, there is an urgent need to look at the pandemic from a gendered lens and formulate laws and bills for the actual empowerment of women. The pandemic has offered newer challenges to 'third' world feminism in a way, because it is only through intersectional feminism, we can completely comprehend the various levels of inequalities in our societies. As already mentioned, education and employment are not the only ways of empowerment but also a revision of the gender roles and an inspection of the gendered spaces in which we exist. Woolf's *Room* in many ways can be used to question the concepts of this gendered space. The new woman of India has to step out of this limbo of being caught between domestic and professional space and how there is an urgent need for a sense of subjectivity and agency. The pandemic only then can serve as a gateway, in its true essence.



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**No Room of One's Own: Rethinking the Idea of Female Domestic Space in India during the Pandemic of COVID -19 through Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own***

**Bio-note**

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