

## Cultural Presentation in Malathi Rao's Disorderly Women and Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own: A Comparative Study

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### Abstract:

*Disorderly Women by Malathi Rao and A Room of One's Own by Virginia Woolf are seminal women-centric texts that explore the theme of female liberation and the struggle for identity in patriarchal societies. Woolf's extended essay, often referred to as the "Feminist Bible," advocates for intellectual freedom, economic independence, and social equality for women. She challenges the notion of a single, unified women's movement, emphasizing instead the diversity of women's experiences. Similarly, Rao's novel presents Indian women navigating societal expectations and asserting agency in both public and private spheres. This paper offers a comparative analysis of the cultural, social, and feminist concerns articulated in both texts, arguing that despite differing contexts, both authors critique gender norms and advocate for women's autonomy. The relevance of these texts remains strong in contemporary feminist discourse, highlighting the ongoing need for gender justice and inclusion.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Women's liberation, Cultural critique, Gender identity, Comparative literature.*

### Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* can be interpreted as a counter-narrative to certain strands of feminist thought—particularly those often categorized as "gender feminism," which emphasize a biologically deterministic view of womanhood and advocate for collective political struggle based on a shared female identity. Woolf departs

from this essentialist stance by asserting that the feminist movement must go beyond the pursuit of formal equality. Instead, she advocates for a deeper transformation in power relations, cultural perceptions, and social structures that define gender roles.

Woolf recognizes that some fundamental feminist concerns—such as access to education, property rights, and

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professional opportunities—have been partially addressed, though not fully resolved. However, she also anticipates the emergence of a gender discourse that may inadvertently intensify the perceived antagonism between men and women. This is visible today in contemporary debates, such as gender-based reservations in India, where some men feel their status is threatened—what Woolf might describe as the unintended consequence of binary-driven feminism.

Crucially, Woolf proposes a more balanced and humanistic approach. For her, social progress depends not on perpetuating opposition between the sexes but on redefining gendered behaviors. She argues that men must become less aggressive and women less passive, with the understanding that "activity" for women does not mean adopting aggression, but rather breaking free from socially conditioned passivity. In this, Woolf envisions a reimagined society where gender roles are no longer dictated by tradition but shaped by freedom, education, and individuality.

In Malathi Rao's novel *Disorderly Women*, we encounter many of the same socio-cultural dynamics that Woolf critiques in her essay. Both texts explore common themes such as the subjectivity of truth, the search for identity, gender inequality, and the need for personal space and individuality. Through this comparative lens, the present study aims to examine how two women writers, from vastly different cultural and historical

contexts, articulate a shared feminist vision.

One of the key narrative techniques shared by both Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Malathi Rao's *Disorderly Women* is the use of the narrator as a central figure to explore and critique societal structures. In Woolf's long fictional essay, the unnamed female narrator is the sole major character, referring to herself simply as "I." She is an erudite and engaging storyteller who guides the reader through a critical examination of women's literary history and the societal obstacles to female creativity. Her introspective and analytical narrative voice enables Woolf to present complex ideas such as the importance of financial independence, the subjectivity of truth, and the necessity of personal space—metaphorically represented as "a room of one's own."

Similarly, in *Disorderly Women*, Malathi Rao employs Ila, one of the four central female characters, as the narrator. Ila serves not merely as a storyteller but as the carrier of what may be called the "burden of memory"—haunted by recollections of a rigid society that confined women within strict cultural and familial roles. Rao's narrator is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context of 1930s Karnataka, particularly within traditional Brahmin households. The novel's unique strength lies in its ability to depict the local Kannada ethos through the medium of English—a linguistic choice that adds a layer of complexity to its

cultural representation. It is this rootedness in regional identity, combined with a universally resonant feminist narrative, that earned the novel the Sahitya Akademi Award for English Writing in 2007.

Both works, despite their different genres and cultural backdrops, utilize the narrator to reflect on the condition of women in their respective societies. Woolf's narrator discusses themes such as economic disparity, creative freedom, and gendered access to education, while Rao's Ila navigates memory, identity, and resistance within a patriarchal framework. The narrators in both texts function not only as voices of observation but also as instruments of critique and agents of feminist consciousness.

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, compels readers to question the authenticity of established truths, even those she herself presents. Paradoxically, she asserts that the fictional elements in literature often convey deeper truths than factual accounts. Through this observation, Woolf reconfigures the way literary traditions and canonical texts are perceived, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of gender, authorship, and truth.

Similarly, Malathi Rao's *Disorderly Women* centers on Ila, a deeply reflective character who seeks to protect her ancestral home, Himalaya, from the commercial motives of her brother. Ila's emotional journey unfolds alongside her contemplation of the struggles endured by

generations of women, making the novel a poignant exploration of memory, identity, and resistance. Written over a span of ten years, the novel reveals Rao's dedication to portraying the complexities of women's lives within the socio-cultural framework of traditional Karnataka.

Rao, much like Woolf, came from a progressive-minded family and developed a growing passion for English literature and writing. Both writers share a common belief in the necessity of personal space for women—a metaphorical and literal “room of one's own.” *Disorderly Women* emerges as a rich narrative amalgamating social realities, personal memory, and imaginative storytelling. Though the characters are fictional, Rao draws inspiration from the stories she heard in her childhood, particularly from her mother, reflecting the customs and values of the time.

The novel delves into the lives of the Madhava community, offering a vivid portrayal of their social environment. Rao argues that such stories must be retold across generations to preserve the memory of one's native culture. The novel thus becomes a vehicle of identity formation and cultural continuity. Importantly, Rao emphasizes that silence or the unspoken carries profound emotional intensity. While some families have evolved beyond patriarchal constraints, others continue to live within the same traditional milieu. Despite repression and social taboos, the characters in *Disorderly Women* exhibit a survival instinct—a desire to assert

individuality and find meaning. They make mistakes, reflect on their past, and yearn for self-fulfillment, embodying the enduring struggle of women to emerge as independent persons within a restrictive society.

Both Virginia Woolf and Malathi Rao powerfully engage with the theme of gender inequality in their respective works. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's narrator emphasizes the systemic discrimination faced by women in society. To illustrate this, she constructs the fictional figure of Judith Shakespeare, the imagined sister of William Shakespeare. Judith possesses the same innate literary genius as her brother, but unlike William, her talents are neither recognized nor nurtured. Instead, she is underestimated by her family and stifled by the rigid expectations of her gender. Forced into an early engagement and denied intellectual freedom, Judith's creative pursuits are hidden in shame, and her resistance to marriage is met with violence. Ultimately, she is driven to suicide. Through Judith's tragic narrative, Woolf argues that even if a woman possessed Shakespeare's level of talent, the societal constraints of the time would have barred her from achieving similar success. Talent alone, she contends, is insufficient without opportunity and social acceptance.

A similar critique of gender inequality is evident in Malathi Rao's *Disorderly Women*. Set in pre-independence India, the novel presents a world where male characters are privileged with education

and freedom, while female characters are confined to domestic spaces, restricted by notions of purity, pollution, and caste-based orthodoxy. Deeply entrenched in custom and tradition, the women live lives dictated by ancestral norms, where rebellion is fraught with personal cost. Those who attempt to defy these conventions often end up isolated and emotionally broken, longing for the familiarity of the very societal prison they once sought to escape. Rao poignantly captures the emotional and psychological toll of these inequalities, illustrating how deeply they are woven into the cultural fabric.

In both texts, Woolf and Rao portray women's oppression not only as a matter of external social structures but also as an internalized experience, shaped by generations of denial, restriction, and resignation.

### Conclusion

*Disorderly Women* can be read as the poignant story of Kamala, a young woman forced into an abusive marriage with a stranger, despite her deep affection for Vasudeva—a student dependent on the charity of her authoritarian father. After enduring emotional and physical suffering, Kamala begins to rebuild her life, pursuing education as a means of reclaiming agency. Her transition from victimhood to empowerment reflects the broader societal shifts occurring in India during the reformatory period led by social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule and Raja Ram Mohan Roy. These leaders

championed causes like the abolition of sati, the promotion of widow remarriage, and the advancement of female education—issues that deeply resonate within Rao's narrative.

Similarly, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf examines the historical subjugation of English women, particularly during the Elizabethan era. She critiques the idealized image of the submissive, self-sacrificing woman—what she famously calls "The Angel in the House"—a trope echoed in Malathi Rao's portrayal of the "Ideal Wife." Both authors emphasize the importance of women's education, individual identity, and the necessity of having a private space—symbolized by a room of one's own—for intellectual and emotional growth.

The concept of a "room" functions as a powerful metaphor in both texts, symbolizing not just physical space, but also privacy, independence, leisure, and creative freedom—all of which are fundamental to dismantling gender inequality. Woolf asserts that until women gain these essential freedoms, they will continue to occupy a subordinate status in society.

Together, *Disorderly Women* and *A Room of One's Own* present a compelling feminist discourse that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. Through their distinct yet resonant voices, Woolf and Rao highlight the persistent struggles of women against patriarchy, and their enduring quest for autonomy, dignity, and self-expression.

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