

## Influence of the Bitter Childhood Experiences on the Life of Virginia Woolf : A Critical Appraisal

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### Abstract:

The present paper attempts to explore the bitter family experiences of Virginia Woolf, which influenced her life, both physically and mentally eventually bringing out her doom. In her memoirs she has categorically stated that the painful incidents of her childhood contributed to her life-long depression. In fact this realization dawned upon her towards the end of her life, when in her memoirs she tried to understand as to how her past decided the course of her life and thought and gave impetus and direction to her works.

**Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Childhood Sexual Abuse, Incest, Depression, Freud, Childhood Sexual Fantasies, Bloomsbury Group, Feminism**

Virginia Woolf was a versatile genius, who distinguished herself as a renowned novelist, feminist-essayist, critic and a central figure of the Bloomsbury Group, which was an intellectual outfit, comprised by her siblings and friends, and stationed at her Bloomsbury house. She is widely acclaimed as one of the most celebrated feminist writers of the time, though paradoxically she was herself the victim of gender discrimination in various ways, including the family violence. As a matter of fact, the mental problems she suffered in life were mainly perpetrated by her bitter family experiences, which were fraught with numerous negative consequences. It, however, goes to the credit of her strong persona that braving all odds she grew and matured into a great writer and the author of several literary masterpieces. Virginia Woolf was the third of the four children of Sir Leslie Stephen and his second wife, Julia Prinsep (Jackson) and was born and brought up in a very complex family, which apart from her real siblings also consisted of children from the previous marriages of her parents. Accordingly, the family of Virginia Woolf, besides her real sister Vanessa Stephen and brothers Thoby Stephen and Adrian Stephen also included George Duckworth, Stella Duckworth and Gerald Duckworth, being the children from her mother's first marriage, and Laura Makepeace Stephen, the girl from her father's first marriage. Thus, the family came to consist of eight children "with numerous servants, their eminent and irascible father, and their beautiful mother." (Aytaç, 2009:1). However, the most remarkable feature of Stephen family was that it was a family of writers and clergymen, as Leslie Stephen himself was an author, critic, historian, biographer, and mountaineer, whose father and grandfather too were writers who wrote extensively against slavery and social injustice, while his maternal family distinguished itself as the founder of the Clapham sect, a puritanical group which "saw no harm in innocent pleasures" (Bell, 1985: 6). In 1859 her father Leslie had been ordained as a minister at Oxford University, but after the death of his father the same year and also disillusioned by the church he left the ministry (7). In view of the above, commenting on the family profile of Virginia Woolf her biographer aptly remarks: "Virginia's family was relatively privileged, and they were a colorful group with a distinct literary heritage that would influence Virginia significantly." (Pippett, 1955: 4- 9).

However, the Stephen family subscribed to the traditional values peculiar to the Victorian era and suffered from gender bias, as per which while boys in the family were sent to school, girls were required to stay home lending a helping hand to their mothers in the discharge of domestic chores.

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They were not sent to school and were expected to marry soon, wherefore to get educated to enable them to pursue a vocation of their own choice was a far cry for them. Virginia Woolf regretted that she did not have a carefree childhood and entertained huge grudge against her father that unlike her brothers who he got admitted in good schools, he did not send her and her sister Vanessa even to an ordinary school. She also felt that neither of her parents had even a little time to care for her problems and needs. She found her mother always overworked, whose first priority was to attend upon her husband rather than the children. Her mother not only recognized the privileged position of her father in the family, but also gave preferential treatment to the boys over the girls, so much so that Stella, her older half-sister had even to work as a free maid for the family. In the same way her father, who suffered from severe depression and had even a suicidal tendency paid little attention to the family affairs. Virginia felt awkward that while her father enjoyed an extraordinarily privileged position in the family, her mother despite all her virtues was wholly subservient to him, who even used to remind the children that their father was free from the laws meant for the ordinary people and should, therefore, not be burdened with any of their problems. Virginia also realized that her parents were quite impatient, who often used to lose temper, particularly while teaching the children. They even punished her half sister Laura severely, who was although mentally 'slow' and treated her inability to learn as a disdain to their authority. The ill treatment meted out to Laura by her parents scared Virginia to the extent that she was left with no courage to share her problems with them and less so with the father. In fact, Virginia's life-long depression seems to be directly linked with such wrong child-rearing practices of her parents. Thus, brought up under such constraints Virginia Woolf found the atmosphere of the family quite suffocating and dubbed her family as a lonely "caravan, absolutely private silent, unknown" (Woolf, 1984, Diary 5, 1 November 1937) and her house "like a cage", (Woolf, 1985: 184), alleging that she was "as an animal trapped within it" (93) and "a prey to any 'wild beast' who chose to harm her" (79).

However, the incestuous assault by her half brothers was by far the darkest side of Virginia's childhood, which left indelible imprint on her mind and made her mentally unbalanced and eventually led her to end her life. As per the story, Virginia's two half brothers, George and Gerald Duckworth regarded her and her sister Vanessa as an object of pleasure and subjected them to sexual abuse. Virginia, who was an exceptionally modest person, found it extremely repulsive and shameful, inasmuch as she never forgot it and carried the guilt all her life. In this respect it was George, whom Virginia accused of making repeated shameful attempts on her modesty after the death of her mother Julia. Quentin Bell in the index to the first volume of the biography of his aunt has termed it as "incestuous relationship", which other biographers also adopted. This disgusting incident is held as the root cause of Virginia's sexual timidity and her periodical fits of insanity. However, the biggest trauma of her life perhaps was when her half brother Gerald assaulted her sexually, while she was barely of six years of age and was recuperating from a whooping cough at the family's summer home. Recalling the shocking incident in her write up, 'Sketch of the Past' (1939), she writes: "I can remember the feel of his hands going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower, I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But he did not stop" (Contributor, <https://studyscanner.com/the-life-of-virginia-woolf/>). In her letters too she has narrated the incident stating: "I still shiver with shame at the memory of my half-brother, standing me on a ledge, aged about 6, and so exploring my private parts. Why should I have felt shame then?" (Woolf, 1982, Letters 6: 3678) She later described this agonizing and shameful incident as "breaking the hymen-a painful operation" (6: 3678), which allegedly turned her frigid as she admitted in another letter that "I was always sexually cowardly" (4: 2194). Deliberating upon the outcome of the above harrowing incident of sexual abuse Lyndall Gordon says

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that Gerald Duckworth “lifted her onto a ledge and explored her private parts - leaving her prey to sexual fear and initiating a lifelong resistance to certain forms of masculine authority.” (Gordon, September 2004)

Virginia, however, did not share her agonizing experience with anybody and remained tight lipped in the best traditions of the Victorian Society. The reason that led Virginia not to disclose the matter to anybody allegedly also lay in the fact that “she knew that she was the one who would be blamed for her failure to remain pure and chaste” (Marsh 1989). This feeling of insecurity and helplessness on the part of Virginia offers a sad commentary on the anti feminine stance of the Victorian society, which thought as if to keep her chastity intact was the sole responsibility of the woman, herself. Bell informs that her father though noticed that “At the age of six she had become a rather different kind of person, more thoughtful and more speculative,” but he attributed the change to her illness (Bell, 1985: 25), despite the fact that some modern scholars opine that a dramatic change in a child’s personality is a good indicator of the child being sexually abused (Finkelhor, 1986: 147, Sgroi, 1982: 40). The shameful incident of outraging her modesty indeed shattered the faith of Virginia in men in general, so much so that she lost faith even in her own father. Moore in this regard reports that Virginia later in her life once told her doctor, Octavia Wilberforce that after her mother had died her father “made too great emotional demands on her” (Moore, 1984: 16). De Salvo (1989), however, believes that Virginia failed to understand that her chronic life-long depression was directly linked to Victorian child-rearing practices and the abuse in her family (124). It is thus obvious that the unsavory incident of sexual abuse left indelible mark on the mind of Virginia Woolf, which made her a chronic victim of fear psychosis against all the male designs. Thus, the combined effect of these childhood experiences drained Woolf of her delicate emotional reserves, heightened her sensitivity to the harsh realities of life, and seriously impaired her ability to cope. Commenting upon the point Lee Marsh remarks, “The effects of child sexual abuse can be seen throughout the life of Virginia Woolf and eventually contributed to her death by suicide” (Marsh, 1989).

Apart from the above, frequent deaths in the family along with those of some other near and dear ones also caused huge mental stress to Virginia Woolf. She lost her mother in 1895 when she was only thirteen and Stella Duckworth, her half sister, who took over her mother’s place, also died hardly two years later. In 1904 her father Leslie Stephen also died of cancer, followed by her brother Thoby Stephen who died of typhoid in November 1906. The death of her father rendered her situation quite critical and in consequence she suffered a severe attack of mental collapse leading even to her hospitalization. Commenting on the point Pippett remarks, “...the loss of the father was felt so deeply by Virginia Woolf that she had to be institutionalized for a period following his death (Pippett, 1955: 52). Susan Bennett Smith in this regard also says that it is well documented that “her mother’s death triggered Virginia’s first breakdown, her father’s death when she was twenty-two precipitated a severe breakdown and a suicide attempt” (Smith, 1995). The death of Thoby also had an indelible effect on Woolf, to the extent that she resurrected him in her writings, e.g. as Jacob in her first experimental novel *Jacob’s Room* and as Percival in *The Waves*. Similarly, the protracted mental illness of her elder half-sister Laura too played a crucial role in intensifying the problems of Virginia Woolf, while the death of Stella led to the first of her several nervous breakdowns. Beside, the deaths of some important members of the Bloomsbury Group, which led to the gradual dispersal of the Bloomsbury Group, also affected the mental poise of Virginia quite a lot. Its process began with the death of Lytton Strachey in 1932, following which his long-time partner Dora Carrington also committed suicide, leaving her totally dejected so much so that she lost all her charms in life and became far more prone to mental imbalances. The death of Lytton was in fact a great personal loss to Virginia, since he was one whose comments on her writings she valued much. Then as if giving

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another severe blow Roger Fry also died in 1934, which affected Virginia Woolf to the extent that even if not keeping well she was constrained to write his biography in 1940, consequent upon which she suffered a severe bout of depression in January 1941. However, the anxiety to complete her novel *Between the Acts* and her distrust in her publisher's praise of the novel, which she found "too slight and sketchy," further aggravated her problem. Though as a remedial measure she decided to delay the publication to enable her to revise it extensively, yet gripped probably by an inferiority complex, she felt as if "she had lost her art" and "she could no longer write" ([http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/Virginia\\_Woolf](http://modernism.research.yale.edu/wiki/index.php/Virginia_Woolf)). Besides, the burden of the Hogarth Press, her disagreement with Leonard over her book *Three Guineas*, (1939), the sour reception of her latest book, the biography of Roger Fry (1940) further shook her mental balance. In this situation, as Nicolson (1980) points out, she began to think "that her whole purpose in life had gone. What was the point in living if she was never again to understand the shape of the world around, or be able to describe it?" (Introduction to Woolf's Letters, Vol. 6)

Thus, the life of Virginia Woolf was infused with numerous tragic experiences *ab initio*, which prominently included the unsavory sexual abuse on her in the very childhood, which rendered her into a permanent case of depression. She fought against it for the most part of her life, but failed to make out a sense. Therefore, in a bid to understand her better, she began to read Freud, which, however, made her confusion worse confounded, as she could not reconcile with Freud's theory of childhood sexual fantasies. As indicated in her diary she felt that to accept Freud's theory would mean that she should ignore all her bitter memories of the past, which for her was well nigh impossible. For, she thought that it "would mean that she was going mad--that her depression was from her madness--that her memories of sexual abuse were nothing more than childish fantasies (and that) Freud was upsetting (and) reducing one to whirlpool" (Woolf, 1984, Diary 5, 9 December, 1939). But strangely despite this negative attitude Virginia continued to read Freud throughout 1940, and as is evident from one of her letters, in sheer disregard of his advice she refused to forget the pain and shame perpetuated by the sexual abuse she experienced in her childhood (Woolf, 1982, Letters, 12 January, 1941). She felt aghast at what had happened to her in her childhood and found unable to cope up with the tremendous stress it unleashed. How disturbed she was in her last days is noted by De Salvo as per which on the 15th of January, 1941 she wrote that she was "ashamed of her own words" and by the end of the month she was down with severe depression (De Salvo, 1989: 132). By March that year she stopped writing her autobiography and in a suicide note addressed to her sister, Vanessa, she wrote that she thought "she was going mad," "She had no fight left" (133) and that "I know I shan't get over it now" (Woolf, 1982, Letters 6: 3702)

It was at this juncture that Virginia finally decided to end her life and in her last letter to her husband Leonard, she made her intention quite clear, saying: "I feel certain that 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 can't concentrate" (Nicolson, 1980: 486) On March 18, 1941 she decided to drown herself, which however was not materialized, but after a week and after writing the third of her suicide letters on March 28, she walked half-mile to reach the River Ouse, filled her pockets with stones, and walked into the water and her dead body was recovered almost after a month on April 18 (481). The inquest report held "suicide with the balance of her mind disturbed" as the cause of death. The irony of fate was that none of her friends and relatives except Leonard, her husband was present at the occasion. Her ashes were buried by her husband under a great elm tree just outside the garden of their house in Rodmell, Sussex on April 21. On her epitaph the concluding words of her novel, *The Waves* were inscribed "Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!" (Nicolson, 1980: 487) Thus, the tumultuous life of a prolific writer of prose- fictional and non-fictional; a crusader for

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social justice; a champion of women's liberation; and a pioneer of feminist movement came to an unceremonious end.

On the basis of the above it can be surmised that Virginia Woolf had a very troubled family life, where she not only faced gender discriminations but also suffered from multiple kinds of oppressions, including the family violence and the childhood sexual abuse. Owing to this she often thought as if she was going mad; she felt no hope in life and had no courage to face another relapse, which eventually led her to end her life (Marsh, 2004). In fact, of the several factors that contributed to the chronic depression of Virginia Woolf, the childhood sexual abuse was perhaps the most dominant, in consequence of which she suffered from both, initial and long-term mental effects. It seems that she could not withstand the mental stress caused by it and always carried the guilt for not being able to protect her honour that culminated into her suicide.

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