



Parallels of Inequity: Analyzing Systemic Discrimination in Virginia Woolf's Work and Contemporary Racial Disparities in America

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Abstract— This paper explores the enduring impacts of systemic discrimination, drawing parallels between Virginia Woolf's portrayal of sexism and the pervasive racism affecting African American communities in the United States. Despite the emancipation of slaves and the awarding of citizenship to African Americans post-Civil War, institutionalized racism through Jim Crow laws has perpetuated significant socioeconomic barriers. This discrimination parallels Woolf's analysis of sexism in "A Room of One's Own," where she asserts that financial and educational exclusion hinders women's intellectual and creative potential. Woolf's critique of the systemic impoverishment of women is mirrored in the racial wealth gap experienced by African Americans, which severely limits their access to higher education and economic advancement. Historical and contemporary examples illustrate how entrenched biases in policy and society maintain these disparities. The paper argues for addressing the root causes of these inequities by ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities, akin to Woolf's metaphorical "room of one's own," to enable true socioeconomic progress for African Americans.



Keywords— English, history, race, slavery, feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

Slavery is an antiquated idea. After all, all slaves were emancipated in the Civil War and African Americans were rightfully awarded citizenship. However, equality in the eyes of the law did not translate to the necessary equity African Americans required to overcome the socioeconomic barriers inflicted upon them in society. As a result of institutionalized discrimination through Jim Crow laws, racism perpetuates as a systemic issue of equity. The pervasiveness of racism parallels Virginia Woolf's portrayal of sexism in her many literary works, where she discusses the potential of women of genius. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf argues that women are often excluded from education due to affordability, setting the foundation for systematic discrimination, which remains relevant today as African Americans are empirically denied access to

higher education as a result of poverty, fostering the racial wealth gap in America.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating historical analysis, literary criticism, and socioeconomic research to explore the parallels between systemic sexism as depicted by Virginia Woolf and the ongoing racial inequities faced by African Americans. The methodology is structured as follows, beginning with literary analysis. The analysis will focus on Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," examining key passages that discuss the exclusion of women from educational and economic opportunities. Specific attention will be given to Woolf's arguments about the necessity of financial independence and educational access for women's intellectual and creative development. Thereafter, formalist

analysis will be employed to examine Woolf's use of language and literary devices, including metaphors, hyperboles, and repetition, to convey the systemic nature of gender-based discrimination. Utilizing a feminist critique, the study will explore how Woolf's arguments reflect broader societal attitudes towards women and the impact of these attitudes on women's opportunities and autonomy. The literary analysis will be further corroborated by comparative historical analysis. This aspect will involve a thorough review of historical documents, including government policies, labor market reports, and contemporary commentaries. These documents will help contextualize the economic conditions and societal attitudes that influenced women's roles and opportunities during Woolf's time. The historical analysis will extend to comparing the socioeconomic conditions of women during Woolf's era with those of African Americans during and after the Jim Crow era. This comparison will highlight similarities in the systemic barriers faced by both groups, such as exclusion from certain jobs, lack of access to quality education, and discriminatory policies that perpetuated economic disparities. Historical analysis will then be supplemented by socioeconomic analysis. Studies and reports on educational disparities will be examined, with a particular focus on the funding and resource allocation in predominantly African American school districts compared to predominantly white districts. Given these analyses, the final step will be synthesizing conclusions. The synthesis will involve integrating insights from the literary analysis of Woolf's work with historical and socioeconomic data. This integration will aim to draw clear parallels between the systemic discrimination faced by women in Woolf's era and the racial inequities affecting African Americans today. A critical analysis will be conducted to examine how historical and contemporary policies and societal biases have perpetuated these disparities. This analysis will explore the root causes of these inequities and emphasize the importance of addressing systemic issues to achieve true socioeconomic equality. These conclusions will ultimately help develop public policy solutions to the issue of systemic racism, if there are any tangible efforts that could be accomplished.

Key systemic issues contributing to the racial wealth gap and educational disparities will be identified, informed by interdisciplinary analysis. These issues will include discriminatory policies, unequal access to resources, and societal biases that perpetuate inequality. Based on the findings, policy interventions and societal changes will be proposed to ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities for African Americans. These interventions will draw on the metaphor of Woolf's "room of one's own" as a framework for empowerment and success.

Recommendations may include policies aimed at increasing funding for schools in underprivileged areas, measures to address the racial wealth gap through economic reforms, and initiatives to promote equal opportunities in education and employment. This expanded methodology aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of gender and racial discrimination, using Woolf's literary critique as a lens to examine and address contemporary socioeconomic challenges.

III. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

First, Woolf argues that wealth is a prerequisite to education, which is historically corroborated by the impact of the Great Depression on female autonomy. When discussing the poetic geniuses of Woolf's time, Woolf remarks that "women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time," ensuring that "women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry."¹ From a formalist perspective, the hyperbole of "from the beginning of time" suggests that this disparity is a systemic issue because women continuously are put down in comparison to men. While there have always been wealthy women, women are poor not in wealth but in tangible freedoms to adequately express their ideas and creativity. "A dog's chance" is utilized as a metaphor to emphasize how improbable female advancement is through the dehumanizing implication of comparing a woman to a dog. Woolf's language, from a feminist critique, conveys the idea that the level of impoverishment that women have experienced serves as a barrier to their intellectual and financial success, systematically placing women at a disadvantage compared to men. Woolf's claims are historically substantiated by the socioeconomic disparities between women and men that were exacerbated by the Great Depression. The New York Historical Society articulates that during the Great Depression, "local, state, and federal government policies favored men and discouraged married women from entering the workforce," while "New Deal programs for women relied on ... traditional forms of women's work."² In the aftermath of World War 1, women were shut out of the factory, or the traditionally 'male' roles that they were forced to take after the draft. As a result, the Great Depression forced women back into domestic roles and lacked the autonomy to pursue more significant careers in society. Furthermore, although President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs provided an abundance of jobs to address the unemployment crisis, these efforts only reemphasized existing gender preconceptions about the roles women could fulfill, taking away any opportunities women had for better jobs. This disparity in opportunity is reflected in

Woolf's argument as due to societal barriers of wealth, women cannot access the necessary opportunities to advance in society. Because employment is a critical factor in accumulating wealth, women during Woolf's time continually could not access the opportunities necessary to thrive because they could not pursue better careers due to traditional gender roles.

Woolf's argument parallels to the impact of structural poverty on opportunities for African American communities. This is corroborated by the Harvard Gazette, which examined the impact of the racial wealth gap on other disparities, ultimately establishing that "the typical white American family has roughly 10 times as much wealth as the typical African American family."³ Due to the legacy of institutionalized racism, African American families lack the wealth to develop a generational standing of being able to access the opportunities necessary to close this gap. As a result of generations of discrimination and an inability to acquire property as a result of redlining, African Americans could not gain access to the many opportunities that came alongside the accumulation of wealth. Even if African Americans attempted to bridge this generational gap, wealth continued to serve as a barrier towards better opportunity. This is corroborated by the US Department of the Treasury's findings that "the value of student loan debt was 30% higher for the typical Black household than for the typical white household in 2019."⁴ Even though African Americans now have access to higher education, due to the distinct racial wealth gap, they often remained in debt. As a result of this financial imbalance, debt conventionally impacts one's credit score, one's ability to purchase a home, which is a form of wealth, and one's ability to invest. These aspects of one's financial security are functionally key to accumulating wealth, and African Americans are often systematically pushed towards financial insecurity. As Woolf argues that women are systematically impoverished, African Americans suffer from a striking wealth gap that amplifies the impact of financial insecurity.

Ultimately, Woolf argues that a systematic lack of equity decreases opportunities due to the vitality of education in *A Room Of One's Own*. When Woolf discusses a substandard meal given to female students and the quality of the women's college dining hall, she remarks that "one cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well."⁵ Examining the language from a formalist perspective, the repetition of "well" emphasizes the impact of "dining" well on a variety of functional aspects in one's life. "Dining" serves as a symbol for the fundamental resources women require to thrive academically, including access to higher education, support from a young age, and opportunities that are given to men instead of women, like academic research or higher paying jobs. From a feminist

lens, the women's college lacks the fundamental resources a woman needs to creatively thrive, while the men's college is well funded with all the necessary resources, highlighting a fatal opportunity gap between men and women. The phenomenon of unfair treatment for women was fueled by the historical push towards female dependence on males, despite the fact that women could enter the workforce. Dartmouth University articulates that in the early 20th century, "the minimum wage for women was defined in relation to the amount of money needed to support a family, termed the 'family wage.'⁶" Instead of providing women with the living wages they rightfully deserved, due to the preconception that women belonged in the home in the role of the caretaker, these wages were decreased upon the assumption that women were provided for by their 'husbands' or male figures in their lives, making women more reliant on their male counterparts. As a result, women who did not have a male counterpart continuously suffered from lower wages and as a result, less wealth, which was necessary to gaining economic equality and accessing better societal opportunities. The 1920s wage gap founded upon sexist beliefs distinctly parallels to Woolf's argument as if societal conditions are not ideal for success and accumulation of wealth, women cannot function adequately in society and achieve the level of autonomy men are often gifted.

Woolf's argument is further corroborated by the empirical denial of access to quality education for African American students. The Harvard Political Review articulates that because "black students are increasingly concentrated in separate school districts from White students in the same state, total revenue shifts in a way that disfavors the typical Black student's district."⁷ Because of unintentional or hidden forms of political discrimination, access to a properly funded school system is often lacking, setting up a generational cycle of access to lower quality education. Education helps close the wealth gap as it enables students to become qualified for higher-paying jobs. Without access to even this, African American students and families fall further behind, setting up African American families for failure as they can never catch up to their white counterparts. Furthermore, the UCLA Civil Rights Project articulates that "over the last 30 years the proportion of schools that were intensely segregated has nearly tripled, rising from 7.4% to 20%."⁸ Although Brown vs. Board of Education ruled against segregation, as a result of a lack of support for school integration due to the nature of school funding systems, African American students cannot attain success and close the wealth gap by accumulating wealth. Because schools are funded by local property taxes, the legacy of redlining set the foundation for educational disparities based on location. This closely

parallels Woolf's argument as she contends that a legacy of discrimination of women and denial to access of opportunities prevents women from seeking future opportunity as intellectual freedom is inextricably intertwined with wealth. The racial wealth gap exacerbates this issue as African American students are often denied opportunity they could otherwise obtain because of the systematic perpetuation of the wealth gap as they were not set up for success, unlike students in inherently wealthier school districts.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the enduring impacts of systemic discrimination through a multidisciplinary lens, drawing parallels between Virginia Woolf's portrayal of gender-based inequities in "A Room of One's Own" and the racial disparities affecting African Americans today. By integrating literary analysis, historical contextualization, and socioeconomic research, the study has illuminated how deeply entrenched biases continue to limit opportunities for marginalized groups. Woolf's arguments about the necessity of financial independence and educational access for women's intellectual and creative development resonate strongly with contemporary issues faced by African Americans. Both groups have historically been excluded from economic and educational opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and discrimination. Woolf's use of metaphors and hyperboles effectively illustrates the systemic nature of gender-based discrimination, while historical and contemporary data highlight similar patterns of racial inequity. The stark racial wealth gap, rooted in historical injustices like redlining and discriminatory lending practices, continues to limit the financial stability and opportunities for African American families. Educational disparities, exacerbated by segregation and inequitable resource allocation, further entrench these inequalities by restricting access to quality education and higher-paying jobs. The synthesis of these findings underscores the systemic nature of both gender and racial discrimination, revealing that historical and contemporary policies and societal biases are deeply intertwined in perpetuating these disparities. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive solutions that tackle the root causes of inequality, ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all.

Policy interventions should focus on increasing funding for schools in underprivileged areas, implementing economic reforms to address the racial wealth gap, and promoting equal opportunities in education and employment. By doing so, society can move towards a future where individuals, regardless of gender or race, have

the resources and opportunities necessary for success, embodying Woolf's vision of a "room of one's own" for everyone. In conclusion, the parallels between Woolf's critique of systemic sexism and the ongoing racial inequities affecting African Americans highlight the persistent nature of these issues. To achieve true socioeconomic equality, it is imperative to address the systemic biases that underlie these disparities and create an environment where all individuals can thrive.

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