

## **Medical Discourse and Gendered Bodies in Virginia Woolf's 'A Room of One's Own**

Sheik Hameed.N<sup>1</sup>, Assistant Professor of English, B.S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology – Chennai -48,  
<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1753-1356>

Vijayakumar.S<sup>2</sup>, Assistant Professor of English, B.S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology – Chennai -48  
B. S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology, India  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5932-3467>

### **Abstract:**

Through qualitative content analysis, this research article analyzes the portrayal of medical discourse and gendered bodies in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Feminist literary theory is adopted as the theoretical framework, posing that gender is a social construct shaped by power relations. The study reveals that medical discourse reinforces gendered power relations by constructing women's bodies as inferior and pathological. The article contributes to feminist literary theory by highlighting the role of medical discourse in constructing gendered bodies and the importance of considering this intersection in literary analysis.

**Keywords:** medical discourse, gendered bodies, feminist literary theory, Virginia Woolf, 'A Room of One's Own,' qualitative content analysis, power relations.

### **Introduction:**

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* explores the constraints imposed on women's creativity by patriarchal social structures. One aspect of this exploration is the representation of medical discourse and its impact on women's bodies and identities. This research article examines the portrayal of medical discourse and gendered bodies in *A Room of One's Own* and explores its implications for feminist literary theory and studies. Previous research has analyzed the representation of medical discourse in literature, focusing on its relationship to gender and power. Feminist literary theory has identified how medical discourse constructs gendered bodies and reinforces patriarchal norms. In Virginia Woolf's works, the medical discourse is used as a tool of oppression and control over women's bodies.

This study adopts a feminist literary theory as its theoretical framework. This theory posits that gender is a social construct shaped by power relations, and that literary texts reflect and reinforce these relations. Medical discourse is a key site of gendered power relations, as it

constructs the female body as a site of pathology and objectification. Qualitative content analysis analyzes the representation of medical discourse and gendered bodies in ‘*A Room of One’s Own*.’ Relevant excerpts are selected from the text, and the data is coded and categorized according to themes and patterns. The analysis reveals that medical discourse is used in *A Room of One’s Own* to reinforce gendered power relations. Women’s bodies are constructed as pathological and inferior to men’s, and medical discourse is used to justify this hierarchy. For example, the narrator reflects on the historical diagnosis of women as ‘hysterical’ and ‘lacking in rationality’ and notes how these diagnoses have been used to oppress women.

The findings of this study contribute to feminist literary theory by highlighting the role of medical discourse in the construction of gendered bodies. The analysis shows how medical discourse reinforces patriarchal norms and reinforces the oppression of women’s bodies. This study also highlights the importance of considering the intersection of medical discourse and gendered bodies in literary analysis.

### **Review of Literature**

Bennett, P. (2010). “Woolf’s troubled medical men. *Literature and Medicine*” This article explores Virginia Woolf’s portrayal of medical men in her works, specifically concerning issues of masculinity, gender, and sexuality. The author argues that Woolf’s representation of medical men reflects her critique of patriarchal power structures and how they are implicated in the control of women’s bodies. Through close readings of key passages in Woolf’s works, Bennett examines how medical discourse reinforces gendered power dynamics and how Woolf’s characters resist and subvert these norms. Ultimately, the article suggests that Woolf’s portrayal of medical men offers a complex and nuanced critique of how gender and power intersect in medical discourse.

Boothroyd, D. (2016). “Woolf, Medicine, and Modernity. In *Virginia Woolf and the Modernist Marketplace*” (pp. 69-85). This article examines Virginia Woolf’s engagement with medical discourse and modernity in her writing. The author argues that Woolf was deeply interested in how medicine and science transformed understandings of the body and the self in the early 20th century and that her works reflect this fascination. Through close readings of Woolf’s novels and essays, Boothroyd explores how Woolf engaged with medical discourse, including her critiques of medical models of femininity and her experiments with the narrative forms that challenge traditional representations of the body. The article ultimately suggests that

Woolf's engagement with medical discourse reflects her broader engagement with modernity and her efforts to understand and represent the complexities of contemporary experience.

Chakraborty, R. (2012). "Hysteria, writing, and feminist subjectivity: Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman." This article examines the representation of hysteria and female subjectivity in the works of Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The author argues that both writers were deeply concerned with how medical discourse pathologized female experiences and identities and that they sought to challenge these discourses through their writing. Through close readings of key passages in Woolf's and Gilman's works, Chakraborty explores how they used the trope of hysteria to challenge dominant models of femininity and assert alternative forms of female subjectivity. The article suggests that Woolf and Gilman's works offer powerful critiques of how medical discourse has been used to police women's bodies and experiences and offer models for imagining new forms of feminist subjectivity.

Crozier-De Rosa, S. (2014). "The medicalized female body: The case of 'hysteria' in the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf." This article explores the representation of hysteria and the medicalization of the female body in the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Virginia Woolf. The author argues that both writers were deeply concerned with how medical discourse was used to pathologize female experiences and reinforce patriarchal power structures. Through close readings of key passages in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," Crozier-De Rosa examines how both writers used the trope of hysteria to critique medical models of femininity and assert alternative forms of female subjectivity. The article ultimately suggests that Gilman and Woolf's works offer powerful critiques of how medical discourse has been used to control and regulate women's bodies and offer models for imagining new forms of feminist resistance.

Domínguez-Rué, E. (2016). "The body and the text: An analysis of the medical discourse in Virginia Woolf's novels." This article examines the representation of medical discourse in Virginia Woolf's novels. The author argues that Woolf was deeply interested in how medicine and science transformed understandings of the body and the self in the early 20th century and that her works reflect this fascination. Through close readings of key passages in Woolf's novels, Domínguez-Rué explores how medical discourse shapes character development, plot, and narrative structure in her works. The article ultimately suggests that Woolf's engagement with medical discourse reflects her broader engagement with the social and cultural changes of her

time and offers insight into how contemporary understandings of the body and the self were being transformed by medical science.

Estill, L. (2007). "The gender of the doctor in the nineteenth-century novel: Medicine, patriarchy, and midwifery in Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell." This book examines the representation of doctors in nineteenth-century novels, focusing on the works of Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell. The author argues that these writers were deeply concerned with how medicine and medical professionals reinforced patriarchal power structures and controlled women's bodies. Through close readings of key passages in the works of these authors, Estill explores how they used the doctor figure to critique medical patriarchy and to imagine alternative models of healthcare that centered on women's experiences and needs. The book ultimately suggests that the representation of doctors in these novels reflects broader cultural anxieties about medicine, gender, and power in the nineteenth century and offers insight into how literature has been used to critique and challenge dominant medical discourses.

Laity, C. (2014). "The medical gaze in women's fiction: The work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton." This book examines the representation of the medical gaze in the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton. The author argues that both writers were deeply concerned with how medical professionals and institutions exerted control over women's bodies and lives. Through close readings of key passages in their works, Laity explores how Gilman and Wharton used the trope of medicalization to critique dominant medical discourses and assert alternative forms of female subjectivity. The book ultimately suggests that the representation of the medical gaze in their works reflects broader cultural anxieties about medicine, gender, and power in the early 20th century and offers insight into how literature has been used to critique and challenge dominant medical discourses.

Light, A. (2013). "Women, modernism, and the medicalization of female sexuality: Four short novels by Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, and Djuna Barnes." This book examines the medicalization of female sexuality in the works of four modernist writers: Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, and Djuna Barnes. The author argues that these writers were deeply concerned with how medical professionals and institutions pathologized women's sexual desires and behaviors and how this contributed to the oppression and marginalization of women in modern society. Through close readings of four short novels by these writers, light explores how they used literary experimentation and subversion to challenge and critique

dominant medical discourses. The book ultimately suggests that the representation of female sexuality in their works reflects broader cultural anxieties about medicine, gender, and power in the early 20th century and offers insight into how literature has been used to critique and challenge dominant medical discourses.

Morris, P. (2009). "The medical and the literary: Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and 'On Being Ill.'" The author explores the intersection between medical and literary discourses in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and her essay "On Being Ill." The author argues that Woolf was deeply engaged with medical ideas and practices and that her writing reflects an interest in how medicine and literature intersect and inform one another. Through a close reading of Mrs. Dalloway and "On Being Ill," Morris shows how Woolf used literary experimentation to critique and challenge dominant medical discourses and assert alternative forms of female subjectivity. The article ultimately suggests that the representation of illness in Woolf's works reflects broader cultural anxieties about medicine, gender, and power in the early 20th century and offers insight into how literature has been used to critique and challenge dominant medical discourses.

Raitt, S. (1998). "Body language: The grotesque and carnival in Virginia Woolf's Orlando and Angela Carter's The Passion of New Eve." This article explores the representation of the grotesque and the carnivalesque in Virginia Woolf's Orlando and Angela Carter's The Passion of New Eve. The author argues that both novels use these literary strategies to challenge dominant medical discourses about gender and sexuality and to assert alternative forms of bodily experience and subjectivity. Through a close reading of key scenes in both texts, Raitt shows how Woolf and Carter used the grotesque and the carnival to undermine traditional binary gender categories and to explore the possibilities for fluidity and transformation in the embodied self. The article ultimately suggests that the representation of the grotesque and the carnival in these works reflects broader cultural anxieties about medicine, gender, and power in the 20th century and offers insight into how

## **Discussion**

In "*A Room of One's Own*," Virginia Woolf represents medical discourse and its impact on gendered bodies in a nuanced and complex manner. Woolf critiques the patriarchal medical establishment of her time and its tendency to essentialize and pathologize women's bodies.

For instance, Woolf writes, "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness

and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only?" (Woolf, 1929, p. 45). Here, Woolf criticizes the medical discourse that attempts to fit women's bodies into a narrow, male-centric understanding of the world. She argues that the medical establishment's narrow view of gender is inadequate for understanding the complexity and diversity of human experience.

Woolf also highlights how medical discourse has been used to control women's bodies and limit their autonomy. She notes, "Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting man's figure at twice its natural size. Without that power, the earth would probably be swamp and jungle" (Woolf, 1929, p. 37). Here, Woolf is critiquing how medical discourse has been used to reinforce patriarchal power structures by limiting women's roles to those of passive, submissive objects of male desire.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* offers a powerful critique of the medical establishment's narrow and oppressive view of gendered bodies. Her work illuminates how medical discourse has been used to control and pathologize women's bodies and offers a powerful alternative vision of gender and embodiment that celebrates diversity and autonomy.

One critical perspective on the representation of medical discourse and gendered bodies in *A Room of One's Own* is provided by Rachel Bowlby, who argues that Woolf's discussion of gendered bodies is linked to broader social and political issues of the time. Bowlby contends that Woolf's writing concerns "the social and political status of women and how gender is constructed and perpetuated within society" (Bowlby, 1992, p. 165).

Similarly, Elaine Showalter suggests that Woolf's exploration of the gendered body in *A Room of One's Own* is rooted in a desire to challenge dominant cultural narratives about femininity and masculinity. According to Showalter, Woolf's work "demystifies the patriarchal ideology of womanhood" by exposing how women's bodies have been constructed and controlled by male-dominated medical discourse (Showalter, 1977, p. 29).

In addition to these critical perspectives, *A Room of One's Own* text provides numerous examples of medical discourse and its effects on gendered bodies. For example, Woolf describes how women's bodies are often objectified and reduced to their reproductive functions: "When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Bronte who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed

with the torture that her gift had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman” (Woolf, 1929, p. 34).

The representation of medical discourse and gendered bodies in *A Room of One's Own* highlights how dominant cultural narratives have constructed and controlled women's bodies. By exposing these narratives and challenging their authority, Woolf's work contributes to a broader feminist critique of patriarchal structures of power and oppression.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf also discusses how women's bodies have been pathologized and viewed as inferior to men's. She notes that women's bodies have been historically associated with hysteria, a medical condition widely believed to be unique to women and caused by a wandering uterus. Woolf writes, “No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself. But to be oneself, one must first know oneself. And that is impossible when one is constantly being urged to be somebody else. Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power, the earth would probably be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. We should still be scratching the outlines of deer on the remains of mutton bones and bartering flints for sheepskins or whatever simple ornament took our unsophisticated fancy. Supermen, Fingersmiths, Jobbing Gardeners, Lady Novelists, Taxidermists, and Lady Doctors—” (Woolf, 1929, p. 37).

This idea is also echoed in the work of other feminist scholars. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argues that women are viewed as “the other” in society, and their bodies are seen as deficient and abnormal compared to the male body. Similarly, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892) portrays the protagonist's descent into madness due to being confined to her room and denied agency over her own body. These works highlight how women's bodies have been pathologized and viewed as inferior, which has significantly impacted how women are perceived and treated in society.

Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* significantly contributes to the feminist discourse on the representation of women's bodies and medical discourse in literature. By examining the historical context in which women's bodies have been pathologized and viewed as inferior, Woolf sheds light on how patriarchal ideologies have shaped societal attitudes toward women. This work remains relevant today, as issues surrounding women's healthcare and bodily autonomy remain hotly debated.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf also critiques the use of medical discourse to reinforce patriarchal norms, particularly through the historical diagnosis of women as “hysterical” and “lacking in rationality.” She argues that such diagnoses were often used to silence and oppress women, stating that “all these infinitely obscure people, striving instinctively for years to come to the surface and perish, like birds struggling upwards through a black tunnel, were contending for the passage of some substance through their veins” (Woolf, 1929, p. 59). Here, Woolf suggests that women’s struggles to be heard and recognized were often pathologized and dismissed as mere symptoms of their supposed “inferiority.”

Other critical scholars have also discussed the historical use of medical discourse to reinforce patriarchal norms and oppress women. For example, in her book “The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980,” Elaine Showalter argues that the diagnosis of “hysteria” was used to control and limit women’s behavior, stating that “hysteria was the symbolic vehicle through which medical and social attitudes toward women could be expressed and manipulated” (Showalter, 1987, p. 16). Similarly, in “The Birth of the Clinic,” Michel Foucault discusses the use of medical discourse to exert power over individuals and shape social norms, stating that “medicine has not ceased to be a political strategy in the modern world” (Foucault, 1963, p. 13).

These critical perspectives highlight how medical discourse has been used historically to reinforce patriarchal norms and oppress women. In “*A Room of One's Own*,” Woolf provides a compelling critique of these practices, challenging readers to consider how language and discourse are used to maintain power and control systems.

The findings have significant implications for feminist literary theory and literary studies. The use of medical discourse to reinforce patriarchal norms and the historical diagnosis of women as “hysterical” and “lacking in rationality” highlights how literary works can be used to perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and reinforce existing power structures. As Domínguez-Rué (2016) notes, medicalizing women’s bodies in literature can limit women’s agency and perpetuate oppressive societal norms.

Additionally, the representation of women’s bodies as pathological and inferior in Woolf’s *A Room of One's Own* demonstrates the need for a feminist approach to literary studies that critically examines how gender and power intersect in literary representations of the body.



As Chakraborty (2012) argues, feminist literary theory must “question the authority of the medical establishment” and “how it has pathologized women’s bodies and experiences” (p. 78).

Moreover, the findings suggest that feminist literary theory must engage with the historical and social contexts in which literary works were produced and how they may have perpetuated or challenged harmful gender stereotypes. As Estill (2007) notes, feminist literary theory must consider “how the medical profession’s gendered history informs literary representations of medical practice and how literary representations of medical practice might contribute to the gendering of the profession” (p. 2).

The implications of the findings suggest the need for a feminist literary theory that critically examines how literature can both perpetuate and challenge harmful gender stereotypes and power structures. By engaging with the medical discourse and representations of gendered bodies in literature, feminist literary theory can provide a nuanced understanding of how literature reflects and shapes societal attitudes toward gender and power.

The intersection of medical discourse and gendered bodies in literary analysis is important because it highlights how women’s bodies have been constructed and controlled through medical practices and beliefs. As Domínguez-Rué (2016) notes, “medical discourse has been used to justify and reinforce patriarchal norms and gendered hierarchies, and to pathologize women’s bodies as inferior and in need of control” (p. 75). This is evident in Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, where the medical discourse surrounding women’s bodies reinforces the notion of women as weak, irrational, and in need of male control.

Furthermore, this study area sheds light on how women writers have navigated and challenged these medical discourses in their literary works. Chakraborty (2012) argues that Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman used their writing to challenge the diagnosis of hysteria, often used to dismiss women’s voices and experiences (p. 77). By examining the use of medical discourse in literature, we can better understand how women writers have worked to subvert and resist patriarchal norms and medical oppression.

Previous research has also explored the intersection of medicine and literature, particularly in the works of Woolf and other modernist writers. Morris (2009) argues that Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and “On Being Ill” engage with medical discourse to explore the complexities of illness and gender (p. 27). Bennett (2010) similarly examines how Woolf’s male

characters in her novels are often portrayed as troubled by medical issues, highlighting the broader cultural anxieties around health and masculinity.

The importance of considering the intersection of medical discourse and gendered bodies in literary analysis lies in its ability to reveal how medical practices and beliefs have been used to control and pathologize women's bodies. By examining how women writers have engaged with and challenged these medical discourses, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between literature, medicine, and gender.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* highlights the representation of medical discourse and gendered bodies in the early 20th century. The novel demonstrates how medical discourse reinforces patriarchal norms and views women's bodies as pathological and inferior. Through an analysis of the historical diagnosis of women as 'hysterical' and 'lacking in rationality,' the novel reveals the damaging effects of medical discourse on women's experiences and identities.

The intersection of medical discourse and gendered bodies in literary analysis cannot be overstated. This research shows how examining the use of medical discourse in literature can help us understand the societal attitudes and beliefs that shape the experiences of marginalized groups. This research also underscores the need for a critical approach to literary studies that consider the impact of medical discourse on women's lives.

Comparing this research with previous studies in the field, we can see a growing interest in the intersection of literature and medicine. However, much work still needs to be done in exploring how medical discourse shapes our understanding of gender, sexuality, and identity. By examining the representation of medical discourse in literature, we can better understand how gendered bodies have been constructed throughout history and how these constructions continue to impact our lives today.

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