
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Owning a Room of One's Own: On the Female Self-Construction in *All Passion Spent*

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ABSTRACT

All Passion Spent is British novelist Vita Sackville-West's masterpiece, an early work that embodies feminist ideas by telling the story of eighty-eight-year-old Mrs Slane, who rejects her children's arrangement after her husband's death and insists on choosing to live alone in a house of her own. The novel demonstrates how women under the patriarchal system are gradually being othered, as well as to get rid of this predicament, and explores the way out for women's freedom and liberation. This work has been hailed as the novel version of the feminist manifesto *A Room of One's Own*. The article mainly focuses on three aspects, namely the loss of the female self, the reconstruction of the female self and the inheritance of the female self in *All Passion Spent*, to explore the feminist thoughts in this novel. Vita not only intends to dig out the material and spiritual dilemmas faced by women but also her exploration and construction of female subjective status and female self, which provides women with a certain amount of spiritual power to know themselves, remake themselves, and realize their self-worth.

KEYWORDS

All Passion Spent; Vita Sackville-West; feminism; self-construction; feminist literary criticism.

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1. Introduction

All Passion Spent is the masterpiece of English novelist Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962). Vita is a prolific writer who won The Hawthornden Prize twice, and her novel was one of the most commercially successful books published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth House. Her novel was a bestseller at the time and greatly improved the reputation and finances of the house in Britain.

All Passion Spent tells the story of a woman's self-awakening in the twilight of her life. As the novel begins, Henry Holland's body awaits burial. Earl of Slane, a career diplomat, former viceroy of India and Prime Minister of England, was an important man in British politics. His widow, Deborah Holland, eighty-eight-year-old Lady Slane, has been obedient for over seventy years. After his death, Mrs Slane, to everyone's surprise, rejects her children's arrangements for the rest of her life and chooses to live alone in a rented house in Hampstead in order to regain the freedom she has longed for. English literary critic Louise DeSalvo described this book as "astonishingly feminist, in its own way, as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*" (DeSalvo, 210). In Western female literary criticism, Virginia Woolf is known as the vanguard of feminism. Her representative work *A Room of One's Own*, with its wisdom and rich imagination, won public love and aroused a strong response in the British literary world. This book, which expounds the historical status of women and the self-construction of women from multiple perspectives, is regarded as a feminist manifesto. There are many thoughts in Vita's *All Passion Spent* that echo Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. This paper will mainly focus on three aspects: the loss of the female self, the reconstruction of the female self, and the inheritance of the female self. It will also try to sort out the feminist thoughts in Vita's novel that echo Woolf's book. It is Vita's practice to Woolf's advocacy of women's writing to show women's survival dilemma and explore women's self-construction through her novel creation, which makes an indelible contribution to the inheritance and development of feminism from generation to generation.

2. The Loss of Female Self

In traditional social life and family life, women have always been in a subordinate position of oppression. As Zhang Guangli and Chen Yao point out: "Economically independent, politically powerless, dominated and controlled by men everywhere, with no protection for their legal rights, the majority of women accept this oppressed subordination as a matter of fate and endure it meekly. The low status of women causes women's psychological inferiority, passivity in behavior and psychological dependence, thus making women lack initiative and subject consciousness" (Zhang and Chen, 54). Female writers keenly feel that the social laws formulated by men in the patriarchal society have oppressed women in all aspects, from politics, economics, marriage and family to learning and education, etc. Such discrimination and oppression against women is a comprehensive exclusion and repression of women's self-consciousness. In her works, Vita has made a delicate description and profound reflection of the situation of women being excluded and lacking in self in the patriarchal culture.

First, the limitations of career choice. In *All Passion Spent*, the young Deborah is full of talent and dreams of becoming an artist, but she does not achieve it, for "everybody seemed agreed—so well agreed, that the matter was not even discussed: there was only one employment open to women" (154). In her view, to become an artist, she had to change her gender and escape the life of a Victorian woman because it was believed that only men could be artists and travel the world freely in this era. It reminds readers of the hypothesis Woolf made in *A Room of One's Own*, that if Shakespeare had had a sister, would she have been as good a writer as her brother? The answer is no because she did not have the right to education, even if she could write; society at that time did not give her the opportunity to become a writer, so she could only be unknown. The expectation of patriarchal morality on women restricts the physical and mental development of women. It requires women to live only for family, husband and children, not for themselves. It does not care whether women are happy or not, and the standard to judge the value of women is whether they can bring happiness to others. Under the influence of this moral culture, women have no choice in social roles except wives and mothers.

Second, being disciplined to be the angel of the room. When women enter marriage in accordance with social norms, the repression and exclusion of women's self has not been reduced. Before the feminist movement in the West, the female image in literary works was dominated by the "angel in the room", a typical Victorian submissive woman who was physically and spiritually attached to men. Woolf describes the angel she saw in the room: "She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it--in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others"(Woolf, 101). Such an angel is the alienated female self, the phantom that emerges after the loss of the female self. It always requires women to be consciously submissive, and most women tend to do so. In *All Passion Spent*, the image of Mrs. Slane is a typical "angel in the room" of Victorian society. In order to be her husband's helpful assistant, "whenever he felt inclined to come home, she must be there, ready to lay down her book, her paper, or her letters; she must be prepared to listen to whatever he had to say; she must entertain his political acquaintances; and even if he beckoned her across the world, she must follow"(160). Lady Slane followed Lord Slane to all the capitals of his business. She tried to behave appropriately on all diplomatic occasions. She accepted and wore gorgeous gifts of jewelry given to her by the head of state, even though she did not like them. "Duty, charity, children, social obligations, public appearances—with these had her days been filled." Lady Slane had been "such a wonderful help to her husband in his career!" (58-9) For years, her own personality and dreams were subservient to her husband's personality and career; she devoted her life to her husband and children, and people even thought she had no will of her own. Mrs. Slane's middle-aged children described her mother as "wholly submissive—an appendage" to her husband (15). This woman, alienated by the patriarchal culture, has all the virtues except herself, without having self-consciousness and self-assertion.

In addition, the right to speak is deprived. In the long patriarchal culture, the right to speech has always been in the hands of men, and women are considered to be silent others. For a long time, women have never been able to make their own unique voice and become a clear, self-conscious subject. As Mary Jacobus puts it, "Femininity itself - heterogeneity, Otherness - becomes the repressed term by which discourse is made possible. The feminine takes its place with the absence, silence, or incoherence that discourse represses" (Jacobus, 12). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf reveals the unequal treatment of women who have long lived in a male-centered society. "It is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet." "But what I find deplorable,..... is that nothing is known about women before the eighteenth century"(39). It is an indisputable fact that women have been deprived of their right to speak in human history. There are several impressive silences in the novel. When Lord Slane proposed to Deborah, she did not think of accepting, even thinking that "the idea is absurd", but people thought it was a good marriage, and her father thought that "young Holland would be Viceroy of India before they had heard the last of him. That would mean that she must be Vicereine" (APS, 144). These thoughts make Deborah like a panicked deer, but her panic is interpreted by Holland as acceptance according to his desire, "according to his desires", embracing and kissing "her with ardour but with restraint" (138). Before she could figure out what had happened, "she was made to feel that in becoming engaged to Mr Holland she had performed an act of exceeding though joyful virtue, had in

fact done that which had always been expected of her" (155). Throughout, no one asked Deborah how she really felt, and she was pushed into marriage without saying anything by the expectations and joy of those around her. After Lord Slane's death, her children discussed what to do with their mother, including where she should live and what should be done with her property and jewels, believing that whatever arrangements were made, their mother would be subject to their wishes, as her oldest son thinks she "lacking enough brains to be self-assertive"(15). They thought that their mother had been accustomed in her life to having her comings and goings arranged by others. All this shows that Mrs. Slane has been in a state of aphasia and self-loss, with no subjectivity to speak of.

Being in a patriarchal society, Mrs Slane does not have the freedom to choose whether to have career choices or marriage. Singh acutely points out that women have always been seen as the shadow of a man, whether that man is a father, husband, or son (Singh, 8). Economic poverty, subordination to men personally and politically, all these oppression and restrictions make women withdraw step by step from real life and finally retreat to the narrow living room, only existing as a man's wife, lover or mother of children.

3. The Reconstruction of Female Self

In the accusation that women's self is almost eliminated by society, in the sorrow that women's self is almost abandoned, women writers have been trying to explore a way to rebuild women's self, restore women's social status, and establish women's strong self-confidence. "Be yourself" is Woolf's call. How to be yourself? Woolf says, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (3).

After her husband's death, Mrs Slane's subjective consciousness begins to awaken. Finding a house of her own is the first step to reinventing herself. Mrs. Slane defied the expectation that she would remain a mere trophy and opposed the children's treatment of her as an inept infant. When Mrs Slane told her children that she would not be living with any of them but intended to live in a house of her own, a house she had seen in Hampstead 35 years ago, they all agreed that "old age had definitely affected her brain" (68). But Mrs Slane argued that she had been too concerned about what other people think for so many years; it's time to take a vacation. "If one is not to please oneself in old age, when is one to please oneself?" (67). As Malgorzata Milczarek analyzes, Lady Slane's "children assume the role of their late father" (Milczarek, 98), so in disobeying their will, Mrs. Slane is essentially rebelling against the will of her husband and against the discipline of patriarchal society.

Mrs. Slane further challenges the children's authority by insisting on visiting the house alone. On the underground journey to Hampstead, Hampstead Heath, "She walked slowly but happily, and without anxiety, as in a friendly retreat, no longer thinking of Henry's opinion of his children, or indeed of anything but the necessity of finding the house, her house" (56). It was during this subway journey that Mrs. Slane began to think about her own life and how Henry's death had brought sudden liberation. Just like the protagonist in Kate Chopin's *The Story of An Hour*, Mrs. Slane suddenly realizes that, for the first time in years, she is free to live her own life without letting someone else's will supersede hers. When she arrived in Hampstead, she found that the "house had indeed been waiting for someone to inhabit it" (Sackville-West, 87). Because of the long, unoccupied state, there are cobwebs on the windowsill and ash falling from the walls. Although new to the house, Mrs. Slane has "some secret understanding with the house," and it has "a life of its own" (81). The house itself seems to reflect Mrs Slane, who lived in a time when women could not express their will and remained in a state of neglect, and just like the house, needed careful cleaning and repair.

If the journey of house searching is the beginning of Mrs. Slane's rediscovery of self, then decorating the house is the process of her overall self-reconstruction. Just getting a room of your own isn't enough. Woolf tells her female audience: "But this freedom is only a beginning--the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it? How are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? These, I think, are questions of the utmost importance and interest. For the first time in history, you are able to ask them; for the first time, you are able to decide for yourselves what the answers should be" (Woolf, 107). The death of her husband brings Mrs Slane a chance to relive her life. In rebelling against her children's arrangements and choosing to live in her own house, Mrs. Slane becomes the artist she has always aspired to be. By renovating the house, she also shapes herself. She sticks to her ideas and shows her artistic aesthetic.

In the house she chooses by herself, Mrs. Slane lives the life she wants. "That was the kind of companionship that Lady Slane wanted; she had had enough of bustle, and of competition, and of one set of ambitions writhing to circumvent another" (57). Lady Slane is able to establish equal relations with people outside her original social class, relations that are more meaningful to her than those she has ever had with the nobility of various countries. Mr Bucktrout, the landlord who has his own unique pace of life; Mr Gosheron, the repairman who is willing to spend a long time making and polishing in pursuit of beauty; Genoux, the maid who has followed Mrs Slane all her life and knows how lonely she was in the crowd; and Mr Fitzgeorge, who not only understands the

lifestyle Mrs. Slayne has chosen for herself for the rest of her life, and their conversation helps her realize that she had “killed” herself by following her husband’s wishes instead of becoming the artist she had aspired to be when she was young. He remarks, “You were defrauded of the one thing that mattered. Nothing matters to the artist except the fulfillment of his sic gift” (220-1). In essence, FitzGeorge reveals the question Mrs. Slane has been thinking- why women cannot be themselves in marriage while men are not asked to change. Every visitor to Mrs. Slane’s house takes her views seriously, and each contributes to her shaping her own world. This house provides Lady Slane with “privacy and independence from the outside world generally, but mainly from her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren” (Harrison, 9). As Lady Slane announces, “I prefer to forget about them. I want no one about me except those who are nearer to their death than to their birth” (59). In this process, Mrs. Slane is able to explore and reconstruct her true self step by step and expand her world. As suggested, “The house becomes a haven for people who are different and who wish to be treated differently, and for those who have been dismissed or overlooked by society - especially the elderly” (Medalie, 15).

Woolf strives for a room for women, which is not only the material basis for their independent existence and the basic guarantee for writing but also the spiritual space for their self-examination and self-identification. In Vita’s works, the house is also not only a place as a material entity but also a private space for individuals, a sign of women’s independence, a carrier of women’s special experience and consciousness, and a carrier of women’s emotions and hearts. Therefore, an income of 500 pounds a year is not an economic benchmark of social class rank but a symbol of independence and freedom. A locked room of one's own is not only a space for free movement but also a metaphor for an independent and free state of mind (Liu, 179).

4. The Inheritance of Female Self

In *A Room of One's Own*, the author is given creative freedom because of the inheritance from her aunt. The legacy implies the material accumulation as well as the literary tradition of the gifts of female predecessors. In *All Passion Spent*, Mrs. Slane didn't leave her descendants a great fortune, but her choices help set another woman on a path of determined self-discovery.

When Mr Fitzgeorge died, his multimillion-dollar collection was left to Mrs Slane according to his will. The family was both surprised and delighted. But Mrs Slane was puzzled, thinking that Mr Fitzgeorge must be confused to have poured his life's treasure of gold and silver into people who just wanted to be left alone (187). Mrs Slane's decision to donate her collection and property to the state deprived her descendants of the opportunity to become heirs to a huge fortune, and her daughter Carrie even wrote that “this has caused her great trauma” and “needs several months to recover before writing to her mother.” She was unfazed by the frantic reactions of her children, for she “wanted nothing more than to put aside the troubles of the world and to have eternal peace” (193) Until her great-granddaughter, Deborah, came to visit her. Mrs Slane was ready for a barrage of blame for refusing her great-grandchildren's visit and then depriving them of a potentially great fortune. But to her surprise, Deborah thanked her for what she had done. Young Deborah told her great-grandmother that she felt her engagement was a mistake, purely to please her grandfather, who had very high expectations for her. However, being a duchess was nothing compared to her ambition to be a musician in her mind. Hearing her great-granddaughter say what she had not been able to say, Mrs Slane realized that “this child, this Deborah, this self, this other self, this projection of herself, was firm and certain” (280). Deborah's short hair also made Mrs. Slane feel that her early plan to escape to pursue her dream had been put into effect. For the first time, Mrs Slane regretted giving away her entire fortune; otherwise, she could have helped Deborah become truly independent and pursue her dream. Deborah, however, was grateful to her great-grandmother for this act, which reduced her worldly value and made it easier for her to get out of the engagement once the illusion of being the heir to a large fortune was shattered.

In reflecting on her life, Mrs. Slane has some “unnatural thoughts”: “If only I had never married ... if only I had never had any children” (177). These disturbing thoughts seem to be filled with regret, yet Mrs. Slane does not sink into remorse. Instead, she helps her great-granddaughter with what she now realizes. In the conversation with her great-grandmother, young Deborah confirms her own values and beliefs, and she is encouraged and supported by her great-grandmother, who has several generations' gap but shares a very similar spirit with her, and begins to imagine recording the time with her great-grandmother by music in the future. “Values rose up like great archangels in the room and towered and spread their wings” (287). Although Lady Slane is always subservient to secular forces, she has not subscribed to secular values throughout her life.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf traces the difficult process of women's entry into the literary world and emphasizes that future female writers should recall their mothers and inherit their courage and experience in artistic creation. “Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot did homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter—the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (57). The conversation between the two Deborahs in *All Passion Spent* is a symbol of female inheritance. Although Mrs. Slane could never be a true artist, she finds new ways to live creatively. And in her great-grandchild Deborah, a young woman with the same dreams and sensibility,

she sees the spirit of a new generation, determined and confident, who would not waver in her determination to become a musician. The young Deborah will live the life of an artist that the old Deborah aspires to. In shaping herself, Mrs Slane passes on to a new generation of women the courage and confidence to pursue their true selves.

Some people think that Mrs. Slane's awakening has come too late, while others think that there is little point in writing about the awakening of old people. Sontag speaks of old age more blatantly as a catastrophic 'shipwreck', in which we are abandoned and left to die since we are assumed to be worthless to the society in which we live (Sontag, 19). McCoy argues that Sackville-West's anti-working class sentiment does not penetrate the novel, as "Lady Slane's social status allows her to make her own decisions in old age. Most importantly, her wealth allows her a sense of independence. She has the financial resources to purchase her own home away from her family and make a new life for herself in her remaining years" (McCoy, 43), which is obviously less likely to happen for working-class women. However, Kathleen Williams Renk believes that these female writers, such as Woolf and Sackville-West, "make modernism new by rejecting previous stereotypical representations of the aging woman and by carefully detailing the various ways in which ageism and sexism make females 'the other', as they speak out against these interlocking oppressions. Their critique presages the later twentieth-century critique and foregrounds the role of the aging woman in modernist art" (Renk, 319). Their work criticizes society's devaluing of old women and women, recognizes their value, and gives people a more complete understanding of the various stages of women's lives. On the title page of the novel, Vita wrote: "The people in the story are old", but the people it is dedicated to are young. *All Passion Spent* is not, as the title suggests; the passion has run out, and life is just about to end. Instead, it tells people not to ignore those who are thought to have lost their meaning in life, focuses on marginalized old women, and negates biased assumptions about older people and how they should live their lives. Any part of life can be meaningful. Aging and death are inevitable, but you can choose different ways to cope with them.

6. Conclusion

What is the goal of feminist fiction? Is fiction a means to change society? Regarding this issue, Professor Gao Wanlong believes that "novels, like today's media, not only express contemporary society but also seek to develop and change the existing social reality" (Gao, 114) [15]. Woolf believes that in the past, due to the suppression of male hegemony, women have lost their right to speak, and their silence has made their history and culture like a dark continent. Woolf hopes that women can actively reconstruct history, and she firmly believes that as long as women can pick up the pen to write, they will be able to enter history in a different way from the patriarchal central culture so that different cultures can be promoted. To this end, she appeals to the women of the 20th century: "Therefore I would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast" (95-96.) Facing different difficulties of female writing in the past, Woolf and Vita set an example for the female writers of the future in the thought and practice of artistic creation. By writing about women's experiences, women writers express their deep concern about women's living conditions and life meaning. Professor Jin Li expresses in the interview that female writers reproduce women's experiences and feelings through reading other writers' works and the process of imitation, revision and inheritance commonly found in texts in their own creations, including thematic echoes, formal imitation, reconstruction of images and intertexturing of texts, thus constructing literary traditions (Huang, 9).

Although Mrs. Slane is described as "no feminist" (101), Vita still reveals the limits of women's choices in a patriarchal society and the self-sacrifice of women in the institution of marriage by creating such a character. No matter how prominent a woman's position is in society, she is not immune to the painful realization of what it means to live in a patriarchal society. *All Passion Spent* also opens up a space for women who recognize that their roles in marriage are merely appendages, not in an equal relationship. As Mrs. Slane's character suggests, independence and happiness can only be truly achieved by actively constructing one's own life. The novel attempts to reflect the current situation of women's self-deficiency, appeals to women to face up to their own situation, tries to get rid of the shackles of patriarchal thoughts, deconstructs the patriarchal society's denial of women's survival value, covers the myth of the female self, promotes female self-awareness, and builds the real female self.

Although this article has dealt with the feminist discourse in *All Passion Spent*, it did not clearly stress the unique literary value of Vita's other works to provide further and stronger proof. Vita Sackville-West's works deserve greater recognition for exposing ideological assumptions in the institution of marriage and the structural violence that is done to women in this institution, as well as her unique narrative techniques. Further studies are expected in this respect.

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