

'However, the majority of women are neither harlots nor courtesans; nor do they sit clasping pug dogs to dusty velvet all through the summer afternoon.' Should we focus on studying ordinary or extraordinary women? Explain your answer with reference to an academic discipline of your choice.

Who deems what type of woman is 'ordinary'? Who dictates how unusual she must be before being classed as 'extraordinary'? By categorizing women in binary terms do we confine them to a static identity? Central to my analysis is the sociological study of 'othering'. Belonging, identity and social status are intrinsically enmeshed in human consciousness. It is instinctive to group people into an 'us' and a 'them' in order to foster a positive sense of identity. The 'us' is ordinary, known, and familiar whereas the 'them' is extraordinary, unknown, and unfamiliar. 'Extraordinary' people, here denoting the *unusual* sense of the word, become 'others' in society in order to distance 'us' from people who do not 'fit in' with the 'ordinary' social group. Othering is a way of negating another person's individual humanity and labelling them as collectively 'different'. The patriarchy established a power dynamic of men being superior to women by differentiating women as 'others'. As 'dichotomies are crucial for practice and the vision of social order'¹, this sinister process, fundamentally ingrained at the heart of patriarchal societies, effectively stultified female emancipation. Liberation would involve the cumbersome task of dismantling a societally ingrained inferior status. This inferior status was established and instilled by discourse surrounding female identities, often in the form of literature. In Woolf's words, 'men have written about women' but 'women do not write books about men'. Here, Woolf shows that men control the narratives written about women while women do not enjoy this same luxury of writing freely about the opposite sex. This reveals that barring women from writing becomes an effective form of patriarchal control; men control the discourse around women, thus controlling their position as 'other'. By perpetuating an idea that women exist as opposite binaries, such as 'extraordinary' or 'ordinary', we continue to reinforce othering processes. These are the same mechanisms that were implemented to dichotomise women from men in the first place, which curtailed women both from the freedom to write fiction, and equal gender status. Therefore, we should not categorize women under confining and 'othering' archetypes but instead promote the study of a spectrum of female identities, disconnected from 'ordinary' or 'extraordinary'.

While it is natural to group identities into an 'us' and 'them' duality, the content of what is 'us' versus 'them' is socially constructed. This means of divide has often been justified by traits that are considered natural, branding women as biologically inferior to men and thus 'others'. Woolf claims that 'by feeling that one has some innate superiority—it may be wealth or rank, or a straight nose...' one will put down others based on this. She goes on to say, 'there is no end to the pathetic devices of the human imagination--over other people'.² Here, Woolf reinforces the fact that these 'others' in society are separated by the simple 'feeling' that one has superiority, not bound to any physiological truth. The specific identities that come to be regarded as 'us' versus 'them' are socially constructed; in Woolf's terms fabricated by 'human imagination'. This construction of 'innate superiority' creates a feeling of power and an idea of dominance, often manifesting in the repression of other, seemingly inferior identities. A man is supposedly dependent on female 'inferiority' for his status and power, just as the female is 'dependent' on the male to compensate for her inherent biological shortcomings.³ Woolf explores this dynamic, saying that her professor 'was concerned not with

¹ Mead, George H, and Charles W. Morris. *Mind, Self and Self from the standpoint of a social behaviourist*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1934.

² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Pg. 32.

³ Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Print.

[women's] inferiority, but with his own superiority'.⁴ Here she expresses the idea that men do not fully care about the female position, but only care about their status in relation to women; as long as the male has pre-eminence and hegemony, anyone below him is irrelevant. The 'feeling' that one is 'innately superior' must be deconstructed in order for egalitarianism to prevail. In attempt to defy the grounding for this power dynamic, De Beauvoir states that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'.⁵ This emphatic sentence demolishes the idea that there is a universal essence of femininity making women profoundly different to men. At birth we are all equal so why should women be labelled as fundamentally and innately inferior? The 'othering' of women is rooted in fictitious justifications surrounding biological shortcomings, which creates a power dynamic that sustains the patriarchy. By separating and labelling people, the judgment is based on perceived differences, whether it be 'inferior' and 'superior' or 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary', making the means of divide both subjective and 'othering' to a certain group.

Building on this idea of perceived difference reinforcing 'othering', this essay turns to look at the transhistorical industry of sex work that has been long stigmatized within society. There is a clear notion, expressed by Woolf,⁶ that 'harlots' and 'courtesans' are frivolous and vapid, spending all their days reclining and 'clasping pug dogs', a repeated action that is entirely devoid of substance. The disposable income available to purchase a pet as well as the 'velvet' create an illusion of opulence but beneath this veneer, the fabric is 'dusty' suggesting laziness and unkemptness. Rebecca West, a novelist, feminist and active suffragette, famously remarked that 'other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a door mat or prostitute'.⁷ West, as a 'feminist', seeks to distance herself from women with sex work experience, equating them to that of a lifeless, trampled on piece of fabric. While both West and Woolf showcase distaste for these women, their disdain is amplified in society. In the latter half of the 19th century and beginning of 20th century 'the prostitute' was actively designated as a marginalised social-sexual identity within medical, psychiatric, and legal discourses.⁸ They were viewed as a nuisance to public health, unruly and diseased. Contemporary academic and popular discourse, as well as the media, construct the prostitute as either a 'victim of patriarchy', or an 'unfit mother', or 'sexually liberated', or 'dirty', or a 'whore', or a multitude of other labels. A dichotomy exists between prostitutes being painted as a subhuman sexual instrument while simultaneously a victim, proving that this discourse is ultimately paradoxical. In 'A Room of One's Own', Woolf shows snippets of discourse surrounding women, highlighting its paradoxical nature. 'Napoleon' thought women 'incapable', she says, but 'Dr Johnson thought the opposite'; some say women have no souls while 'others, on the contrary, maintain that women are half divine'. While some believe, 'they are shallower in the brain' others say, 'that they are deeper in the consciousness'.⁹ By using names such as 'Dr Johnson' and 'Napoleon', Woolf reinforces how singular, individual men have the authority to dictate the capabilities of all women while women cannot even 'write books about men'. These conflicting opinions show how female experience was constructed merely on the theorising of men. Discourse about women thus becomes socially constructed by 'men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women'¹⁰. Therefore, Woolf emphasizes the abundance of narratives and representations imposed on women

⁴ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Pg. 32.

⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Pg. 87.

⁷ West, Rebecca. *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-1917*. 1982.

⁸ Hulusjö, Anna (2013) *A critical perspective on difference: 'the prostitute' and women with prostitution experience*, Nordic Social Work Research. Pg. 176-184.

⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Pg. 28.

¹⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Pg. 25.

who are barred even from their own subjectivity. Returning back to sex workers, they have had little access to the discourses with which their lives have been entangled, meaning that their experiences have been shaped by speculation in the same way that women's narratives were based upon men hypothesising. Rather than focusing on the 'prostitute' as an identity category, defined by a myriad of 'othering' labels, we should emphasise the individuality of a female sex worker, destabilizing the 'prostitute' as fundamentally different from 'normal' women.

Rooted in this idea of 'extraordinary' is difference which perpetuates fear particularly prominent in the debate around the morality of prostitution. Women and men are held to different standards of sexual conduct in a society that fears female promiscuity. Woolf explores this double standard by saying that, 'chastity ... has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts'¹¹ within the woman, suggesting that this ideal is deeply entrenched into the wiring of female bodies. While 'at the same time...there was a young man living freely with this gypsy or with that great lady'.¹² Men can live liberally with 'this' and 'that' women, reinforcing the arbitrary, carelessness in their manner while simultaneously, virginity is imprinted onto women's consciousness. Men are rewarded and praised for heterosexual sexual contacts, whereas girls and women are judged and stigmatized for similar behaviours. Female promiscuity has been feared in a society that is fixated on female purity, virginity and chastity. By engaging in a job that is centred around promiscuity, such as sex work, this ideal of chasteness is disregarded, straying from socio-normative principles, making the industry of sex work a breeding ground for contestation and thus alienation of workers.

The feminist movement is often condemned for serving only middle-upper class white women and isolating already marginalised people such as black, LGBTQ+ and less economically privileged women. An equally marginalised and ultimately underrepresented group within feminism is sex workers¹³ who have been rendered as 'other of the other: the other within the categorical other 'women''.¹⁴ Inherent to most feminist discourse on sex work is the view that prostitution is a choice. Sociological, psychological and educational factors are not considered.¹⁵ More than half the women in the industry are from dysfunctional families, school dropouts or from lower socio-economic backgrounds headed by single parents with little education or economic viability.¹⁶ Accordingly, 88% live in extreme poverty¹⁷. On average, a prostitute gets raped once a week and has up to a 75% chance of experiencing sexual violence at some point in their careers.¹⁸ Prostitutes, therefore, need the feminist movement behind them and feminists should be even more willing to fight their corner as a result of these multiple marginalisation's and vulnerabilities. However, feminist ideologies about prostitution tend not to be supportive or inclusive of sex workers. They are either considered a hindrance to the women's movement, or sexually empowered or supporting an inherently oppressive industry. Liberal feminists argue that sex work is 'liberating' and 'empowering' for women as they get to monetise something as condemned in society as female sexual promiscuity.¹⁹ Thus, these women are 'rejecting' the shame that comes with extensive sexual experience and

¹¹ Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Penguin Books, 2004

¹² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. Pg. 69.

¹³ When referred to sex workers or prostitutes, I will be talking solely about females as they make up a notable majority of the industry, up to 90% word wide. Balfour, Reuben. *A Review of the Literature on Sex Workers and Social Exclusion*. 2014. Pg. 4.

¹⁴ Bell, *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*.

¹⁵ Robinson, Cynthia Cole. "CHAPTER TWO: Feminist Theory and Prostitution." *Counterpoints*, vol. 302, 2007. Pg. 21–3

¹⁶ Robinson, "CHAPTER TWO: Feminist Theory and Prostitution."

¹⁷ Hulusjö, *A critical perspective on difference: 'the prostitute' and women with prostitution experience'*.

¹⁸ Deering, Kathleen. "A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers." *American journal of public health*, 2014. Pg. 104-5.

¹⁹ Shrage, Laurie. "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution." *Ethics*, vol. 99, no. 2, 1989. Pg. 347–361

choosing to emancipate themselves from the cultural construct of female sexual morality. However, the crucial word is 'choosing'. These women often do not have a choice in this line of work. Therefore, by claiming the industry as wholly 'empowering', the level of choice a woman has in commodifying her body is undermined and women who have had destructive and disempowering experiences in the industry are alienated. On the other hand, radical feminists argue that sex work 'perpetuates socially hegemonic beliefs which oppress all women in many domains of their lives'.²⁰ This suggests that sex work supposedly accentuates women's sexuality over their other characteristics and in this way leads to the objectification of all women.²¹ The role of the prostitute does not inherently feed into a society that binds women to sexual and non-sexual subordination. Much of the feminist work that exists on prostitutes is not constructed based on sex worker experiences, in the same way that before females had a voice, much of what was written about them was done so by men, who lacked female experience. Theorising is done by non-prostitutes so the production of feminist discourse around prostitution alienates the labourer herself from the process of her own representation.²² The shaping of such discourse by feminists feeds into the marginalising construction of the 'prostitute' which is doubly ironic: both because the movement is meant to be inclusive of all women and because men formerly ostracised women by theorising about their experiences and capabilities.

In conclusion, women should not be defined as 'ordinary' or 'extraordinary', as categorising, in most cases, leads to some form of 'othering'. Overarching labels like 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' strip individuality and complexity from within personal female narratives. Labels formed in feminist, academic and popular discourse, of prostitutes as 'sexually liberated' or 'victims of the patriarchy' or 'sluts', serve this same purpose. Through the example of sex workers, we can see how labelling of any kind, boxes women into socially constructed identities and statuses. Woolf expresses the contradictory hypothesising by men that moulded women into 'others' based on fictitious identities and the idea of 'innate superiority'. Prostitution is 'extraordinary'; prostitutes are people who diverge from sanctioned social norms, however by studying them and their experiences, the stigma surrounding such jobs may be dissipated. Thus, if we solely focus on studying one type of women over another, a group of women becomes underrepresented and susceptible to an othered, potentially stigmatised status. Our studies should not favour one type of women over another type, but instead, express a variety of differing narratives in order to relay a diverse understanding of the female experience, as rich and nuanced as it is.

²⁰ Shrage, "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution."

²¹ Liberto, Hallie Rose. "Normalizing Prostitution versus Normalizing the Alienability of Sexual Rights: A Response to Scott A. Anderson." *Ethics*, vol. 120, no. 1, 2009. Pg. 138–145.

²² Hulusjö, *A critical perspective on difference: 'the prostitute' and women with prostitution experience*.

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