

## **Women Struggle in Ali Smith's Novel "How to Be Both"**

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### *Abstract*

*This study analyzes the struggles of women experienced by the two main characters in the novel *How to be Both* by Ali Smith. This study uses the Virginia Wolf theory, the inheritance of gender inequality from a mother to her child and will be passed back to her child. The author uses a qualitative approach to analyze and identify the struggles of women in the novel *How to be Both*. Furthermore, the theory is also used to find out how the main character does to overcome the struggle of a woman. This research has the result that a woman will continue to inherit gender inequality from her parents. Therefore, the mother of the main character in this novel teaches her child to be an independent woman. Unfortunately the mother died when the main character was only 16 years old. The main character is in a crisis because his mother died. Furthermore, the father chose to go to calm himself rather than comfort his son. But the main character tries to learn from what her mother has taught her about being an independent woman. Furthermore, there are several friends from the main character who provide support to face the crisis. Finally the main character managed to get out of his crisis and could accept his mother's death.*

**Keywords:** *Woman struggle, Novel, Feminism, Virginia Wolf.*

### **A. Introduction**

Every individual possesses equal roles in society. Both women and men have the right to participate in public and private spheres without constraints or prohibitions. As Gordon (2002, p. 211) contends, feminism serves as an analysis of women's subordination with the aim of instigating change. For Gordon, feminism also encompasses an impulse to enhance the power and autonomy of women within their families, communities, and broader society. Furthermore, Gordon defines feminism as a critique of male supremacy, formulated and offered with the intention of effecting change.

Despite these ideals, many societies continue to regard men as more dominant than women, granting them the right to control women's lives. Consequently, women find themselves unable to assert control over their own destinies, compelled to abide by male directives without recourse. This societal construct perpetuates the subordination of women to men, a phenomenon evident even in nations like the United States, where a commitment to gender equality is enshrined in foundational documents such as the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence, penned in 1776, stands as a cornerstone of human rights advocacy, proclaiming that all individuals are created equal by a divine entity and endowed with the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In principle, this declaration underscores Americans' reverence for the rights of all individuals, irrespective of gender. However, in practice, the social systems in America often fail to align with the principles espoused in this historic document, particularly concerning the freedom of women to fully participate in society.

In the aftermath of the declaration, American women found themselves relegated to second-class status while men assumed positions of primacy. This stratification is symptomatic of a patriarchal social system, wherein men wield authority over all social elements, including the governance of women's lives. The entrenched nature of this system makes achieving equal roles and freedoms for women a formidable challenge, impeding their access to various social spheres.

The family unit serves as a primary arena for the transmission of societal values, including gender roles. Parents typically direct male offspring to assume leadership roles within the family and society, while encouraging female offspring to rely on men and fulfill domestic duties. This early indoctrination into gendered roles often occurs without question, perpetuating societal norms that prioritize men over women. As Charvet (1982) observes, the differentiation in behavior between men and women within familial contexts underscores society's perception of women as sexual objects rather than autonomous individuals. Additionally, McDowell (1992) notes society's tendency to view women as dependent creatures occupying a subordinate position relative to men.

Gender inequality manifests as unjust treatment and limited opportunities for women in society. The social disparity, wherein men exercise control and enjoy greater access to public spaces, breeds resentment and envy among women. Recognizing their roles as predominantly confined to childcare and domestic chores, women become increasingly cognizant of patriarchal values that underpin societal structures. This awareness fuels the women's movement, a collective endeavor aimed at restoring gender equality in social life..

## **B. Method**

The writer employed a Qualitative Approach to examine and delineate the Struggle of Women in the novel "How to be Both." This approach was chosen because the novel incorporates certain assumptions implicit in its narrative descriptions and dialogues. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is defined as follows: "Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the

participant's setting. Data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data." (Creswell, 2009). Creswell's definition indicates that qualitative research is geared towards investigating social and human problems, necessitating the selection of data from events and issues. Qualitative research entails an inductive analysis of data, progressing from specific themes to general themes. Subsequently, the researcher is tasked with observing and interpreting the significance of the collected data.

### **C. Findings and Discussion**

Accepting the loss of her mother proves to be a formidable challenge for George, one laden with memories of cherished moments they shared. Yet amidst the grief, a poignant message from her mother emerges, encapsulated in the following quote: "So always risk your skin, she said, and never fear losing it, 'cause it always does some good one way or another when the powers that be deign to take it off us" (Smith, 2014: 98). Here, George's mother imparts a lesson on painting, urging George to embrace her artistic endeavors fearlessly, much like navigating life's uncertainties.

As George grapples with her mother's teachings, she begins to unravel the profundity of her words. Through art, George finds solace amid her sorrow, encapsulated in her reflection: "Art makes nothing happen in a way that makes something happen" (Smith, 2014: 47). While art cannot resurrect her mother, it serves as a conduit to evoke her presence, offering George a semblance of comfort and connection.

In her journey towards acceptance, George finds support in her friends, particularly Helena Fishker, whose unwavering presence brings moments of levity amidst the darkness. Through Helena's companionship, George navigates the complexities of grief and begins to envision a future devoid of despair. Furthermore, Mrs. Rock, a neighbor and psychiatrist, lends her expertise to George's plight, guiding her through moments of introspection and self-reckoning. Through their interactions, George confronts her vulnerabilities, acknowledging the depth of her sorrow while embracing the resilience within.

Amidst the tumult of emotions, George grapples with existential questions, pondering the essence of memory and the enduring legacy of those we love. Through her artistic pursuits, George seeks to immortalize her mother's spirit, weaving her presence into the fabric of her creations. Ultimately, George's journey towards acceptance is fraught with challenges and revelations, yet through the support of her friends and the resilience of her spirit, she emerges stronger, poised to embrace the future with newfound clarity and conviction. As she contemplates the complexities of familial bonds, George reconciles with her father, forging a path towards reconciliation and healing.

In the tapestry of grief and resilience, George's story serves as a testament to the enduring power of love and the transformative nature of acceptance. As she navigates the labyrinth of loss, George emerges not as a victim of circumstance, but as a beacon of hope, illuminating the path towards healing and redemption.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The writer concludes that women's struggle, as per Virginia Woolf's theory, revolves around the necessity of financial independence and personal space to pursue creative endeavors. Additionally, women inherit a tradition of subjugation from their female ancestors, passing it on to future generations. This tradition perpetuates the notion of women's dependence on men and their perceived weakness. George's mother, an independent woman, aimed to challenge this tradition by teaching her daughter, George, to be self-reliant. However, George's mother's untimely death when George was just 16 left her ill-prepared for independence. George grapples with the challenges women face following her mother's passing, experiencing profound depression as she struggles to accept the loss. Fortunately, supportive friends aid her through this crisis, reminding her of her mother's belief that individuals can live on through their artistic creations. This notion prompts George to believe her mother's spirit persists in her art. Moreover, George finds solace in an imaginary friendship with Francesco del Cossa, a painter admired by her mother. Francesco's character mirrors George's own grief over losing a loved one, yet also guides her towards acceptance and independence in the face of loss.

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