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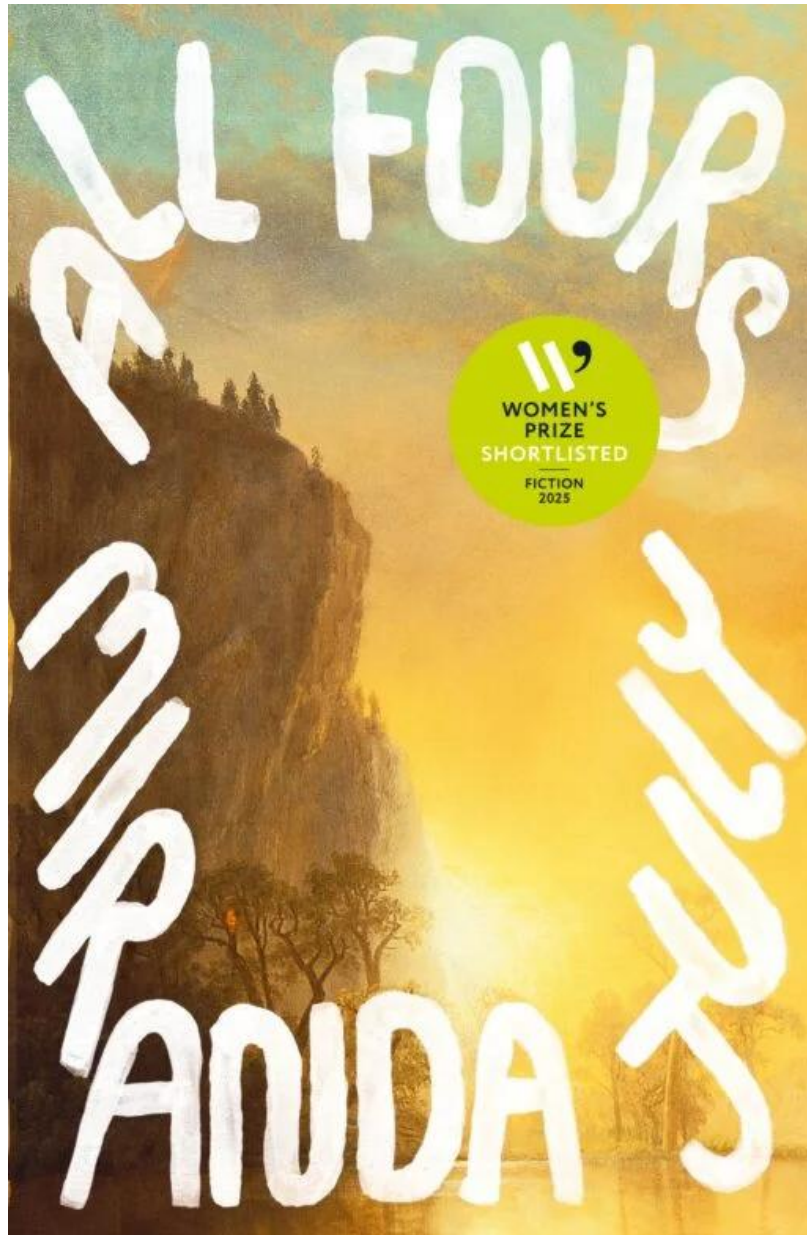
A Room of Her Own: Female Desire in Miranda July's *All Fours*

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- 2024
- extension of the Modernist Artist novel genre: young male artist → mature female artist
- a 45-year-old woman artist struggling with *desire* as midlife and perimenopause cause her creative, emotional, and sexual apathy
- a (motel) room of her own enables liberation/revival

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

- Shakespeare's sister as an impossibility:
 - "genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people" (Woolf 54)
- women cannot develop or express their "genius" in a world determined by patriarchy, which exploits them
 - "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 7)



Money

- "I pondered . . . what effect poverty has on the mind; and what effect wealth has on the mind. . . . For that visit to Oxbridge and the luncheon and the dinner had started a swarm of questions. Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?" (Woolf 29-30).
- Against gendering and labelling:
 - "I do not believe that gifts, whether of mind or character, can be weighed like sugar and butter, not even in Cambridge, where they are so adept at putting people into classes and fixing caps on their heads and letters after their names" (Woolf 114).

Maternity as Hindrance

- If only Mrs Seton and her mother and her mother before her had learnt the great art of making money and had left their money, like their fathers and their grandfathers before them, to found fellowships and lectureships and prizes and scholarships appropriated to the use of their own sex . . . [w]e might have been exploring or writing; mooning about the venerable places of the earth ; sitting contemplative on the steps of the Parthenon, or going at ten to an office and coming home comfortably at half-past four to write a little poetry. Only, if Mrs Seton and her like had gone into business at the age of fifteen, there would have been – that was the snag in the argument – no Mary. . . . For, to endow a college would necessitate the suppression of families altogether. Making a fortune and bearing thirteen children – no human being could stand it. Consider the facts, we said. First there are nine months before the baby is born. Then the baby is born. Then there are three or four months spent in feeding the baby. After the baby is fed there are certainly five years spent in playing with the baby (Woolf 26-27).

All Fours (2024)



- an unnamed autodiegetic narrator
 - artist, boldly explicit and frank
- family life clashes with her work
 - “In the home I focus on turning the wheel of the household so we can enjoy a smooth, healthy life without disaster or illness. This involves perpetual planning” (July 8-9).
- traumatized by undergoing fetal-maternal hemorrhage (FMH) → emergency C-section, baby in intensive care for 17 days
- the child, Sam (intentionally ungendered by the narrator), is now 7 y.o., but the narrator still has debilitating flashbacks

Parenting and Gender Expectations

- "Harris and I were just two workaholics, fairly equal. Without a child I could dance across the sexism of my era, whereas becoming a mother shoved my face right down into it. A latent bias, internalized by both of us, suddenly leapt forth in parenthood. It was now obvious that Harris was openly rewarded for each thing he did while I was quietly shamed for the same things. There was no way to fight back against this, no one to point a finger at, because it came from everywhere. Even walking around my own house I felt haunted, flush with guilt about every single thing I did or didn't do. Harris couldn't see the haunting and this was the worst part: to be living with someone who fundamentally didn't believe me and was really, really sick of having to pretend to empathize—or else be the bad guy!" (July 17-18).

LA to NY Road-Trip?

- "I had just turned forty-five and this trip was my gift to myself. I was going to see plays and art and stay in a nice hotel instead of with friends, which normally would feel like a waste of money, but I'd gotten a surprise check—a whiskey company had licensed a sentence I'd written years ago for a new global print campaign. . . . Twenty grand" (July 10).
- a (symbolic) journey of self-exploration to end her creative block
- rejects the initial idea of a cross-country road trip → essentially masculine narrative (road novel)
- stays in a motel room for three weeks → renovates it to create her own feminine and personal space

The Room (Motel Excelsior, 321)

- "the pretty **bedspread** . . . It was densely filled and quilted in a star pattern, satiny but not garish, salmon colored. It was the sort of **very feminine and decadent** thing I'd wanted my whole life" (July 48).
- "I felt very alive, kind of buzzy. I had never really decorated, not with actual money" (52).
- total reconstruction: bathtub, bathroom tiles, wallpaper, sound system, mattress, carpet, towels, room scent... (53-70)
- "star tiles . . . The air smelled of dark honey . . . the streetlight came through the pink and gold curtains like a blaze of fire; it would always be sunset in here. . . **'It's very girly'**" (102).

Being on All Fours

- she comes to terms with her desires, has a platonic affair with a younger man, a relationship with a woman, gets a divorce and her old life completely unravels
- understands that trauma and failure are not the end:
 - “the most stable position. Like a table. It’s hard to be knocked down when you’re on all fours” (July 360).
 - ”Room 321 was the cave and I was its guard. I had made a goddamn womb and I had oneness in it every week. With myself, with God, with my friends and sometimes lovers. And I didn’t own it. Because you don’t. Own anything, not even your own womb, your own body. It all goes. But every Wednesday I could get back in there, with or without lust, and be—what was the word? Free” (370-71).

Literal and Symbolic Space

- " I slept in room 322 like a stone at the bottom of a well. I woke up in the past. Through half-open eyes I saw the room exactly as it had been a year and a half ago, my first morning in the Excelsior. . . . Very gently, I took my laptop out of my bag and climbed back into the thin bed. I wrote it as I saw it, alive before my eyes" (July 371).
- Once you find your voice, you are free everywhere: "Indeed the whole world was the motel room. The whole universe? Yes, everything was the room; you could not step outside of it, not even by dying. . . . If 321 was everywhere then . . . I could always be how I was in the room. Imperfect, ungendered, game, unashamed. I had everything I needed in my pockets, a full soul" (July 385).
 - "give her a room of her own and five hundred a year, let her speak her mind and leave out half that she now puts in, and she will write a better book one of these days. She will be a poet . . . in another hundred years' Time" (Woolf 102).

Conclusion

- *All Fours* continues and expands on Woolf's feminist concerns
- broadens the scope of the (Modernist) Artist novel to include women
- lifts the stigma of middle-aged women's desires
- a room of her own is a space **out of society**: a sense of liberation from heteronormativity and gendering → enables self-actualization both as a person and writer

Thank you!

- "when a subject is highly controversial - and any question about sex is that - . . . Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact" (8).
- " That collar I have spoken of, women and fiction, the need of coming to some conclusion on a subject that raises all sorts of prejudices and passions, bowed my head to the ground" (Woolf 9).

- “the illusion which inspired Tennyson and Christina Rossetti to sing so passionately about the coming of their loves is far rarer now than then” (Woolf 19-20).
- „Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction – so we are told” (Woolf 20).