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The Self Under Extreme Conditions in Virginia Woolf's Writing

Gemma Macdonald-Washington

In her writings, Virginia Woolf illustrates the struggles of the individual under extreme conditions through the prism of the self: the crux of the individual. Psychoanalysis, as advanced by Freud and Lacan, in addition to more recent theories of gender performativity, will afford comment on Woolf's texts and the nature of selfhood. Ultimately, the self is shown to be compromised by social restraints and patriarchal impositions; this is reflected both in terms of Woolf's characters and in terms of the individual female artist. As a corrective to the repressions of patriarchy, Woolf advocates an androgynous selfhood.

Virginia Woolf introduced a new style of writing, applying feminist principles to literature and allowing the female voice finally to be heard. Woolf aimed at creating a radical new form of androgynous expression, which attempted to marry both the sexes together, forging a kind of equality (at least within the mind of the individual) where neither sex is privileged over the other, in contrast to traditional social and literary structures. Through 'A Room of One's Own', *Mrs Dalloway*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*, Woolf explores the idea of the fragmented self, the deconstruction of social and gender norms, and reaches for the underlying unconscious self that remains at the core of our existence.

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Through the study of psychoanalysis of the self, the relationship between the unconscious and the conscious is explored as sites constituting the individual. Woolf explores the division between these sites as they are brought into conflict by external cultural constructions. This is exemplified by patriarchal impositions upon the self, which are rooted in a flawed conception of bodily aesthetics that transcends into the literary domain. By dismantling boundaries through her literary portrayal of the self, Woolf is able to liberate the self despite the extreme impositions of social patriarchy.

PSYCHOANALYSIS OF THE SELF

Psychoanalysis was first introduced as an investigation into psychosis, for example studying patients suffering from schizophrenia and paranoia.¹ It was later applied to the general sphere as an investigation into the individual, examining the buried repressions embedded within the unconscious² that formulates a sense of self fragmentation.

Freud's psychoanalysis first emerged in the early 1900s and acted as a theoretical study in which sexuality and the unconscious were centred at the core of the individual.³ Freud's purpose was 'to derive the mind from the body' through several domains of the self which permeate the individual.⁴ He explains that the self consists of three main disciplines. The first is the Dynamic, which is described as 'the site where the instinctual drives meet the necessities of external reality' usually connected to the feelings of pleasure and pain.⁵ The second discipline is known as the Economic, where the 'ego evolves to mediate the actions of the body so as to achieve optimal satisfaction of its needs. The ego is particularly concerned with self-preservation,' implying a

¹ M. Sarup, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Biddles Ltd, 1992), 9

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

need for ‘control of the basic instincts if there is to be adjustment to reality’.⁶ This results in ‘a struggle between the reality principle and the pleasure principle in which the body has to learn to postpone pleasure and accept a degree of unpleasure in order to comply with social demands.’⁷ The third and final discipline, which Freud revisited in 1923, was that of the Typographical which was split into three subsystems: the instinctual drive, the ego, and the superego, a new term used to define the representation of parental and social influences upon the drives. Thus the ‘superego acts as a conscience constantly castigating the ego for failing to control the id [instinctual drives]. The ego is seen to be the vital arbiter between the conflicting demands of the id, the external world, and the superego.’⁸

To summarise: the ego is the conscious visual representation of the self displayed to the world by the individual, repressing certain “weak” qualities and formulating a front (hence there is a distinction and conflict between the public and private self). The superego unconsciously undercuts this egotistic front through the repression of desire. The individual therefore consists of a fragmented self whose actions (sometimes regulated by the subconscious) cannot always be justified, and sometimes this self struggles to accept reality.

Within *Mrs Dalloway*, the character of Septimus Warren Smith resembles the supposed schizophrenic who cannot differentiate between reality and the imaginary. However, Septimus’ struggles are not purely internal, but also reflect external impositions upon the self, namely that of patriarchal ideology. Fighting in the war, the paragon of masculine activity, Septimus is forced to suppress “feminine” feelings, relegating them to the private and unconscious sphere. When his comrade Evan dies he is ‘far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

feeling very little and very reasonably.⁹ Nevertheless, these unconscious repressions inevitably resurface and this trauma leads to Septimus' suicide. This is demonstrative not merely of the violence of patriarchal society, as Woolf shows:

Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death.¹⁰

The fragmented and conflicting sites of the self are thereby harmonised in death as the self is liberated from external constraints. Through the destruction of the body, the self finally achieves transcendence, and this can be read as the first of Woolf's challenges to restrictive structures in her search for the true nature of the self.

THE ORDER OF THE SYMBOLIC

The extreme conditions imposed by patriarchy are likewise reflected in Lacan's Order of the Symbolic which facilitates between the stages of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, the identification of the individual through their insertion into the sphere of language. The initial concept used to define these terms appears in Lacan's 'The Mirror Stage' (1936), which relays the image of a small child recognising itself in the mirror for the first time.

The concept of the mirror phase draws our attention to the interdependency of image, identity and identification. One of the main features of the mirror phase is that the child is in a state of nursing dependency and relative motor inco-ordination and yet the image returned to the child is fixed and stable. The basic relation, then, is

⁹ V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 1925 (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2002), 94

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 202

between a fragmented or inco-ordinate subject and its totalising image.¹¹

When the small child first recognises itself in the mirror, the symbolic matrix comes into play whereby 'I' is precipitated. The child identifies itself through coordination of its action with the reflection in the mirror. The Symbolic stage is thus the symbolism and meaning of language imposed onto the child; one is immersed in the symbolic order of language and is subjected to its meaning whether there exists any truth to meaning at all. Lacan's theory of the self that is manifested through language is influenced by French structuralist Ferdinand De Saussure's study of language as 'individual signs [...] composed of sound or written signifiers and signifieds (meanings)¹². Additionally, much of Lacan's theory is inspired by the ideas of Levi-Strauss who writes:

Access to the Symbolic Order is achieved by crossing the frontier, out of the Imaginary, the dyadic world of mother and child, into recognition of the Father's Name and his Law. That is one created by social exchange, culture and taboos.¹³

Moreover, Levi-Strauss argues that 'society should be seen as an ensemble of symbolic systems'¹⁴ whereby each individual knows where he or she fits into the order and can identify with this position. This structuralist theory is fundamental within *The Waves* and distinguishes its characters, investigating the depth of patriarchal manipulation of the self through the symbolics of language.

The three female characters of *The Waves* – Susan, Jinny and Rhoda – could be interpreted as representations of the mother, the lover and the virgin within

¹¹ Sarup, *Lacan*, 102

¹² C. Weedon, 'Subjects' in M. Eagleton (ed.) *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 125

¹³ Levi Strauss cited in Sarup, *Lacan*, 48

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the patriarchal symbolic order. Women are interpreted as inherently inferior within this order because of their symbolic “castration”, which will be considered later in relation to gender. Consequently ‘women must either accept the laws and conventions of language, or reject it entirely and be silent, or hesitate and risk going mad.’¹⁵

Within Lacan’s Imaginary Stage, language does not exist; it is only when meeting the symbolic, language is born. Susan identifies with the Imaginary Stage, but her refusal of the language of the Symbolic Stage means she cannot disassociate herself with the image of the mother, as she opts to remain quiet, declaring ‘I need no words’¹⁶. Susan considers language detrimental as it falsifies the world we live in, and instead insists upon on a return to the Imaginary: ‘When you are silent you are beautiful again.’¹⁷ The Symbolic structure does not merely reduce her to the role of mother, but as previously suggested by Levi-Strauss, it threatens to deprive her of this role, when her child too crosses into the Symbolic Order and identifies with the paternal system.

Jinny however inserts herself into the Symbolic, rejecting the maternal and embracing a more masculinised role. Despite her assumed inferiority, Jinny exploits her difference to attain sexual power, traditionally associated with the male:

Living by means of the body and of a repetitive sex ritual symbolizes the existence of Jinny. Her bedroom is her temple; her mirror, her altar. Sexual consummation for her is mystical union of subject and object, of microcosm and macrocosm. It is also her way of knowing both self and world.¹⁸

¹⁵ C. Taylor, ‘Kristevan themes in Virginia Woolf’s “The Waves”’ (2006) 29.3 *Journal of Modern Literature*, 62

¹⁶ V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 1931 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1960), 209

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98

¹⁸ J. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness* (London: University of California Press, 1970), 210

Jinny denies other aspects of selfhood, privileging her sexuality in an attempt at empowerment. Whilst her conscious ego projects the sexual validation to entice men to her window, she constantly seeks self-reassurance through her obsession with her own reflection. This reasserts her identity within the symbolic order as a sexual object to reside under the male gaze, thus she remains subjected under patriarchy.

In contradistinction, Rhoda refuses the Symbolic of her own reflection, avowing 'I hate looking glasses which show me my real face'¹⁹, thus denying her obligations as a woman in the Symbolic Order. She opts to retain her virginity which is prized amongst many feminists as a way of abstaining from the patriarchal system and thereby retaining the self. Maria DiBattista suggests 'virginity is an exclusively feminine symbol of freedom and integrity'²⁰. Rhoda's ultimate downfall occurs however when she succumbs to sexual desire and is 'stained... and corrupted'²¹. The loss of her virginity casts her into the domain presided over by men, and non-identification with either sex within the symbolic order means that she would rather 'diminish to nothingness'²², committing suicide, than have to submit herself artificially to something she is not. Ultimately, whilst all three of the female characters of *The Waves* attempt to elude the constraints of patriarchy, all are eventually subjected to its pervasive power.

Patriarchy attempts to solidify the roles of both men and women within structures, yet Woolf demonstrates through the character of Bernard that the complexity of the self is such that it does not adhere to ideological limitations. Like Derrida, Bernard strips back the individual to the core, dispensing with the physical. He questions what sex is and what it means to have a sex through the

¹⁹ Woolf, *The Waves*, 31

²⁰ M. DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels* (London: Yale University Press, 1980), 38

²¹ Woolf, *The Waves*, 145

²² See *Ibid.*

underlying power of the unconscious. The mind and the self are shown to be androgynous, capable of containing both male and female attributes, as Bernard implies when stating 'nor do I always know if I am man or woman, Bernard [...] Jinny, or Rhoda'²³. Bernard therefore illustrates the limitations of the Symbolic Order which is stagnant and lacks the fluidity to incorporate the vastness and complexity of the unconscious in formulating identity and selfhood. He avers:

We are not slaves bound to suffer incessantly unrecorded petty blows on our bent backs. We are not sheep either, following a master. We are creators. We too have made something that will join the innumerable congregations of past time.²⁴

The possibilities of the self are thus shown to be infinite, and moreover cannot be truly contained by the arbitrary distinction of sex. Woolf validates and champions the potential of the self beneath the shell of sex.

SOCIETY AND PERFORMANCE

Freud's infamous Oedipus Complex offers a synopsis of repression rooted both in sex and the unconscious. Freud argues 'that sexual identity is not merely anatomically determined, but psychologically constructed'.²⁵ Initially, the young boy naturally initially identifies with his mother through the maternal bond, but upon realising his father constitutes a rival for her attentions fantasises about eliminating the competition. However, this incestuous notion is later abandoned and the child aligns with the father upon realising his mother is "castrated", perceiving himself likewise threatened with emasculation; moreover, by identifying with the paternal order, he too could occupy a position of power.²⁶

²³ *Ibid.*, 199

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 105

²⁵ Sarup, *Lacan*, 4

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5

Female subordination occurs then because of the lack of the phallus. The female sex therefore is destined to become the inadequate form of the male sex, submitting to the phallic order as Catherine Belsey comments:

If the slash of castration is logically prior to the oblique stroke of difference, women, always already castrated, can never enter fully into the symbolic order, have inevitably a shaky purchase on meaning, and remain forever at the mercy of the phallic power which is patriarchy.²⁷

Freud's theory is susceptible to challenges however, as reflected by feminist Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of the differences between the two sexes. Beauvoir states 'a woman is not born a woman, but rather becomes one'²⁸ aiding the notion that gender and sexuality are not related, and nor are gender and the self. Gender roles are socially constructed and regulated by the societal sphere of radical taboo. Beauvoir therefore argues one does not have to be female to necessarily become a "woman". Butler notes:

If "the body is a situation," as [Beauvoir] claims, there is no resource to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity. Indeed sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along.²⁹

However, a distinction can be made between sex and gender. Sex applies to the biological state of the body (the hormones and genitalia of the body that distinguish male and female bodies) but gender refers to the social constructions of identity, being masculine or feminine, man or woman. The individual is

²⁷ C. Belsey, 'The Romantic Construction of the Unconscious' in F. Barker, et al., (eds) *Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-84* (London: Methuen, 1986), 61

²⁸ S. Beauvoir, cited in J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 11

²⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 11

forced to enact stereotypical gender roles through the external pressure of social expectations. Gender roles are not intrinsic then, but performative. As Belsey (following Foucault) states: "The body has no "natural" being which precedes culture: it is too socialised, held in the signifying chain from the moment of birth"³⁰, compromised first through gender ideology, and later the system of language.

Just as the mind can be viewed as androgynous and sexually neither, so the body can similarly be perceived as anatomically neither. Woolf explores this notion in *Orlando* through the metamorphosis of the eponymous protagonist as he transforms from he to she, and her to him, over several centuries until the birth of modernity. The physical body acts merely as a vehicle of the self - the self "Orlando" remains constant throughout the novel in mind and thought; although as shown previously the aesthetics of the body can impinge upon the potential for self-realisation.

The artificiality of gender roles is highlighted not merely through Orlando's physical transformations, but also through the power of sartorial changes. Woolf is quick to address how clothes and modes of dress can distinguish male from female by the means of *Orlando*: 'Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same too'³¹. This emphasises that the extreme conditions imposed upon the self are rooted in superficial distinctions. Woolf writes that clothes 'change our view of the world and the world's view of us.'³² Clothes provide a means of identifying with, or performing, masculinity or femininity: 'For the probability of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love both sexes equally.'³³ Orlando disguises his/her physical body with the symbolism of

³⁰ Belsey, 'The Romantic Construction of the Unconscious', 61

³¹ V. Woolf, *Orlando*, 1928 (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000), 108

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 128

clothes, in order to express his/her underlying self which refuses to adopt the repressive codes instigated by gender.

These codes are shown to be entrenched within the figure of Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway*. As a woman under patriarchy, she is reduced to a commodity owned by man; Mrs Dalloway appears as the possession of her husband. This implied ownership is manifested in her name: she is not 'Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore' but 'Mrs Richard Dalloway.'³⁴ This finds stark contrast in the figure of Miss Kilman, whose name is expressive of her self-autonomy as an unmarried woman. The notion of patriarchal ownership, is not simply restricted to the domestic, but is likewise evident within the domain of literature.

RE-WRITING PATRIARCHY

Against this backdrop, Woolf, as a forerunner of feminism, challenges the supposed male supremacy within the literary sphere, dismantling patriarchal structures and advocating androgyny in self and art.

In one of her most famous essays 'A Room of One's Own', Woolf challenges masculine ownership of the literary domain. She declares that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'.³⁵ However, the argument of the essay lies within the social irony that for a woman to have access to literature and education, although her self has infinite potential, she is reliant on man's assistance for her liberation; given that man retains ownership of capital under patriarchal hegemony. Thus 'intellectual freedom depends upon material things'.³⁶ Woolf insists on the universality of literature, asserting:

³⁴ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 11

³⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1928 (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000), 6

³⁶ M. Barrett, *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing* (London: Women's Press, 1979), 8

Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.³⁷

Woolf instigates a literary revolution which embraces variety in order to achieve intellectual growth, not solely for the individual and self, but for society as a whole. This is most acutely expressed in her advocacy of androgyny, where the “feminine” self is not repressed but is equally weighted alongside that of the male. Woolf validates the notion, previously espoused by Coleridge, that ‘a great mind is androgynous’.³⁸ Indeed, Woolf sees the fusion of the male and female in androgyny as essential to art and self-expression. She therefore argues that:

Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. The whole of the mind must lie wide open if we are to get the sense that the writer is communicating his experience with perfect fullness.³⁹

The emphasis lies on the creative and unconscious self that is not confined by the conscious ego of sex; indeed, Woolf praises the female writers whose ‘pages were full of [the] curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself.’⁴⁰ It is this form of androgynous expression that Woolf invokes and deploys in deconstructing patriarchal structures superimposed upon literature.

³⁷ V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 76

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 97

³⁹ *Ibid.* 103

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 92

CONCLUSION

Throughout Woolf's works, the individual's selfhood is shown to be compromised by the extremes of patriarchal ideology. Woolf illustrates patriarchy's destructive potential through the filter of her characters. As an enthusiast of the study of psychoanalysis herself, Woolf penetrates her literary works with the questioning of the self, illustrating the fragmentation and complexity manifest within the self. This complexity cannot be contained within the rigidified structures of patriarchy represented through Freud's notion of "castration", and Lacan's Symbolic Order. Gender is shown to be a social construct rather than an intrinsic truth, an external imposition that subjectifies the individual within a repressive framework. Although males and females are biologically different, underneath this there is nothing to distinguish the two, as demonstrated through the notion of gender performativity promoted by theorists such as Butler and Foucault. The self is therefore a site of both masculinity and femininity which are only in conflict due to external factors. Woolf champions androgyny and the liberation of the unconscious and thereby demolishes the patriarchal extremes manifested in society and literature. Woolf seeks not only the emancipation of females through her writings, but, more broadly, the liberation of the self from collective repression.

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