

## The Notions of 'Subject' and 'Ideology' in Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall"

Dr. Farid Parvaneh<sup>1</sup> and Mitra Salari<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

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This paper is an attempt to study the notions of Identity and Self and its formation through the intrusion of Ideology in "The Mark on the Wall". Virginia Woolf had already been well-introduced as a feminist critic and themes such as the elusive nature of storytelling and character study, the nature of truth and reality, and the role of women in society had been thoroughly explored in her short stories. Being known as the master of stream-of-consciousness and one of the pioneers in internal monologue, her notions of 'Self' and 'Identity', with their striking resemblance to Freudian notion of 'Subject Formation' have indeed yet not received the appropriate consideration in the researches and deserves more attention. Explorations drawing on her notions of 'Subject Formation', inevitably lead to Althusserian-Gramscian 'Ideology'/'Hegemony', as well as the power struggles and 'Dissidence' concealed in the unconscious of the text.

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**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, short stories, 'Subject Formation', 'Ideology', 'Dissidence', unconscious

### 1. Introduction

Running a quick search about Virginia Woolf as a writer, novelist, and critic, one begins to get acquainted with her mainly as an avant-garde feminist writer. Having written several short stories, novels, and essays \_particularly the essay "A Room of One's Own" which either directly or indirectly, bluntly or implicitly determine her stance against the patriarchal dominance over the "second sex", which had suppressed the voice of women to the extent that feminine existence as a social and historical contributor is nearly excluded, Virginia Woolf leaves no doubt to be known as a suffragette.

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor. Islamic Azad University, Qom Branch, Iran. E-mail: faridparvaneh@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup>MA Student of English Language and Literature, Central Tehran Branch

The fact that her works deserve scrutiny in the light of "feminism" is undeniable; however, they still have got the potential to be viewed critically in a much broader sense.

What seems to be conspicuously absent in most of the critiques are her notions on 'Self' and philosophical/ ideological \_dared to say "sexless" \_ 'Subject'. This is not to condemn the feministic outlook on Woolf's writings, but to transmit or even surpass the sexist views which had almost always reduced her works as a mere assertion to revive the nevertaken-serious women's right and position in the society. The aforementioned potentiality in her works, goes beyond the limitations of gender-based views and opens a new horizon to a puzzling ambiguity which encompasses the "Being"(Wander,32)\_ regardless of gender and "anima" i.e. the form or embodiment in which existence emerges. The type of the criticism which can fully pay off indebtedness to Virginia Woolf's unique art is one which seeks and peeks through the underlying mentality, ideology, and philosophy upon which only the shell of feminism had been pondered.

A minute analytical vantage point is needed to dig much deeper and plow the texts which are inevitably and undoubtedly inseparable from their context. No matter how skillfully the notions of 'Self', 'Truth', and 'Reality' have been hidden, subtle nuances of meaning are yet crying to be deciphered. Of course this is not claimed to be done easily. Along her confusing techniques of stream of consciousness, and internal monologue which already complicate the process of decoding and comprehension, encountering 'dissidence', 'resistance', and conflicting incongruities within the unconscious socio-politico-historic- ideological context of their production, make the reading of her works such a bumpy experience that one cannot get by safely without stumbling .

This essay strives to address the issue of Subject Formation and Ideology, mainly through the cultural materialistic point of view. In this regard, Neo-Marxist notions of Ideology and hegemony, and Foucauldian notions of Subject, plus some other supporting theories propounded by Bakhtin are employed to dig into the unconscious of the text. As Fredrick Jameson has noted, "Literature [...] often tries to repress historical truth, but analysis can reveal its underlying ideology (that is its unconscious)" (Barry, 2009, pp. 143-144).

## 2. Identity and Subject Formation

As Ronchetti(2004) states “[...] the question of the artist’s relationship to others and the surrounding world is one that intrigued Woolf throughout her writing career” (131). It is true that Woolf’s writings are to a great deal biographical and self-reflexive, however, taking the “death of the author” into consideration, one may go one step further than a simplistic relationship between the “author” as an “artist” and “the surrounding world” to face a much more significant and broader relationship between the ‘Individuals’/‘Subjects’ to the context in which they are placed.

Woolf’s representation of the ‘Self’ or ‘Individual Subject’ is considerably comparable with the ‘contingent’ model proposed by Foucault. Though the underlying struggle, or sometimes conflict, that Woolf has in regarding ‘Self’ as what Foucault calls ‘free agent’ does not allow a total and complete coverage, yet moments of overlapping occur.

Marshall (2001) in his essay draws on Foucauldian concept of ‘Self’, proposing that “the self cannot be taken as a fixed and immutable given, as in many traditional accounts of the self” (77). It is to say that ‘Self’ is changeable, and an ontological question on the “what”-ness of ‘Subject’ may remain a for-ever-open one. Woolf’s mentality of ‘Self’ is more or less the same in accenting and preferring the “how”-ness of ‘Subject Formation’, and the impressionist-relativistic view over a deterministic one. The traditionally-defined concepts of ‘Reality’ and ‘Truth’ which are intrinsically intertwined with the definition of ‘Self’ and ‘Identity’, are not of transcendental significance for Woolf; mainly in “The Mark on The Wall” she is casting doubt upon each and every notion that has been believed to be an untouched divine ‘Fact’.

The very first paragraph of the story reads “In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw” (Woolf, 1997, p.47). As Woolf goes on, holding the grip on ‘Reflection’, she declares that And the novelists in the future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted, as the Greeks did and Shakespeare perhaps\_ but these generalizations are very worthless (50).

It should be stressed that Woolf's short stories are not manifestos revolving around and striving for presenting a model for 'Subject'. Yet there are traces spread sporadically throughout the texts which can constitute the body of her philosophizing on the concept of 'Being' and 'Existence'. In "The Mark on the Wall", for example, she follows her stream of consciousness, by taking the grip on the chains of signifiers to defer the process of 'Naming', or 'Labeling', and repudiates the taken-for-granted meaning which it implies. She perpetually plays in a 'Skeptic' manner, sprinkles the eggs of 'Uncertainty', and slips through the claws of freezing force of immovable bedridden "meaning". "No, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known" (52). She does not want to let the "hanging suspended" (52) particles of thought lose their dynamicity while entrapped in a gravity-based structure which forces them to surrender and gives them no other option but to "dissolve in the air".

Marshall (2001) quotes from Foucault that "...it is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not always identical to itself in each case one plays, one establishes a different relation to oneself" (pp.84-85). The same could be seen in the Woolf's attitude towards the "Mark" on the wall. She is constantly evading from providing a clear definition on the mark, and her evasion is a deliberate abstinence from certainty, "But as for that mark, I'm not sure about it" (p. 48).

The "Mark" on the wall, can be seen as 'Self', 'Subject', 'Identity', and it is playing the role of a symbol for any signifier which is attributed arbitrarily to a signified, defined by and within any sign system. What Woolf's method of narration suggests, is the importance of 'how' one's subjectivity or interiority determines the 'Existence' and the 'Reality' of an external object. "Everything is moving, falling, slipping, vanishing... There is a vast upheaval of matter" (54).

Morris (1994) provides a glossary of Bakhtin's terms, among which, "[...] mean[ing] is to respond constantly and open-endedly to one's addressivity in the world, as all human beings must. Meaning is always a becoming, an absolute potential in an absolute future. Bakhtin is fundamentally opposed to any notion of meaning as fixed in time or space" (p.249). What Woolf's narrator calls "nameless damnation" (50) is the desperate need of 'Hegemony' to clasp "meaning" in order to survive.

To conclude, Rochetti's (2004) assertion is worthy of mention: [T]he writer may craft his or her art at some remove from others, but only after having obtained the raw materials of that art from life, which he or she observes closely and experiences in all its richness as an ordinary human being living among his or her contemporaries (p.131).

Woolfian attitude towards the 'Subject Formation' which is inseparable from 'Reflection' and 'Interpretation' is well-said in "The Mark on the Wall": Suppose the looking glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people \_ what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes( p.50).

It is discernible that Woolfian 'Subject' is not an "aeternaveritas" i.e. eternal truth; "as something that remains constant in the midst of all flux, as a sure measure of things" (Marshall, 2001, p. 75). To her, 'Subject' is formed through what also Foucault believes in as "thoughtful disobedience" or "voluntary insubordination" (Marshall, 2001, p. 77). The similarity between the ideas of these two non-contemporaneous figures is astonishing and thought provoking, especially when both, each in his/her own way, emphasize "the self's refusal to be subjected" and it is quite palpable in Woolf's first-person narrator/focalizer whose narration is nothing but an evasion and escape towards the run-way of the chaotic realm of thought.

### **3. Function of 'Ideology'**

In "The Mark on the Wall", which is published as the last of eight short stories collected in *Monday or Tuesday*, Woolf is "lodging [...] upon" (p.47) "the mystery of life; the inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have \_ what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization" (p. 48).

The poetic lamentation on the “ignorance” and “little control” is rather a sad criticism on the dominant ‘Ideology’. Barry’s quotation of Goldstein, defines ‘Ideology’ as a key term for Althusser, as “a system (possessing its logic and proper rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts according to the case endowed with an existence and an historical role at the heart of a given society” (141). Woolf’s narrator though claims “But how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn’t interest me at all. I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the pleasant thoughts”(49).

While she is expressing her dissatisfaction with a fake ‘Fact’ imposed on the individuals through the process of “civilization”, she seeks emancipation in retreating into the ‘Self’ and immersing into her limitless thoughts which perpetually disobey and defy the rules of not only society, but also “Time” and “Space”.

The remedy of “thought” can alleviate the pain of being a marionette, manipulated by the pushes and pulls of the invisible strings in the hands of the dominant discourse. I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts. [...] how dull this is, this historical fiction! It doesn’t interest me at all. I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the pleasantest thoughts [...]. (49)

The “hostility” and “obstacle” which she mentions are the boundaries demarcated by Power. It reminds one of the Althusserian distinction between “state power” and “state control”, and the allegiance with Gramsci’s contrast between “rule” and “hegemony” in the sense that the former is maintained by “repressive structures” and “direct political control”, whereas the latter is practiced in a more subtle manner, “by seeming to secure the internal consent of its citizens”. Barry (2009) explains that ‘hegemony’ (as defined by Raymond Williams) [is] ‘the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings, values and beliefs of a kind which can be abstracted as a “world-view” or “class outlook”’ (p. 85).

Hegemony is like an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem 'natural' or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all, just the way things are. For Woolf, however, there is no such feeling of consent in this imprisonment. In this short story, Woolf is restlessly seeking freedom, though highly skeptically, doubting " \_if freedom exists [at all]. ... " (p. 51) Maneuvering on the notion of Althusserian "ideology", one finds Woolf's "The Mark on The Wall", a mere disobedience and defiance. Bertens suggests that "[ideological] faultlines are to be found in all cultures, it is only natural that they should turn up in literary texts\_ especially in literary texts, in fact, because literature offers a place where, with ideology still firmly in control, contradictions and tensions can be addressed and worked through" (pp.186-187). 'Dissidence' in fact constitutes the very base of the story as soon as the subjectivity and interiority of the first-person, limited narrator is favored over the desirable 'objectivity' in 'Hegemony'. By favoring 'thought' over 'action', Woolf states: "Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action\_ men, we assume, who don't think. Still there's no harm in putting a full stop to one's disagreeable thoughts by looking at a mark on the wall " (p.53) .

Allen in the final chapter of *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Language*, claims that Woolf is "thinking against the current", and "Woolf's call for participation, for activity, for critical thinking and critical reading" is in fact encouraging all of us to do so (113). She continues "Woolf's writings convey – in a multitude of contexts – that the smooth and conventional must be refused, while the rough and the 'wild' will go a long way towards helping us 'see', in the fullest sense of that word" (114).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Allen assists in providing the conclusion of this study so well by pinpointing that interestingly, these opposing voices, this mass of differing and nuanced opinion serves us well, as we think back to Woolf's words, to her calls for multiple perspectives, diverse voices, a sense of awareness, involvement, critical thinking and critical reading; this approach, modelled by her narrative and rhetorical strategies, will keep us moving, away from the complacency that afflicts so many, and will free some new voices to enter the fray.

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