

المذ والجزر في رواية فرجينيا وولف «إلى المنارة»

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الخصائص الأنثوية للسرد في رواية فرجينيا وولف "إلى المنارة"، في ضوء نظرية "الكتابة الأنثوية"، للناقدة الفرنسية هيلين سيكسو، التي طرحتها في مقالها المثيرة للجدل "ضحكة ميدوسا" عام 1976. تحاول الدراسة أن تظهر أن الأسلوب المميز للسرد في كتاب فرجينيا وولف يستبق بعقود الخاصية الأنثوية التي طرحتها سيكسو، والتي تنطلق من تجربة المرأة مع جسدها. لذلك فإن أسلوب وولف سيتصف بالسرد الانسيابي والمزج بين السرد الشعري والشخصي وتمثيلات الأمومة، بالإضافة إلى الحدود الزمانية والمكانية المفتوحة. كل هذه الخصائص تعبر عن الروح الأنثوية التي تحدد هوية الكاتبة. كما تبحث الدراسة أيضاً فيجماليات التجربة الأنثوية من خلال شخصية الرسامة الطموحة ليلي بريسكو، التي تسقط من خلالها ألم واضطراب عملية الإبداع والإنتاج بالتوازي مع تجربة الكاتبة نفسها، في تحليل نوعي دقيق للرواية، وتهدف الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على أسبقية أسلوب السرد الأنثوي لـ (ولف) الذي طرحته لاحقاً النظريات النسوية الفرنسية لهيلين سيكسو وجوليا كريستيفا من بين آخرين في سبعينيات القرن الماضي وثمانينياته؛ ومن ثم تتوصل الدراسة من خلال تناولها لنص الكاتبة فرجينيا وولف - من منظور مختلف عما سبق دراسته - إلى تأكيد الخاصية الكامنة المتأصلة فيجمالياته السردية والحدائية التي تشكل هويتها ككاتبة مبدعة وكامرأة. بعبارة أخرى؛ تتوصل الدراسة إلى أن الكتابة الأدبية للكاتبات يمكن أن تقدم نماذج سردية منفتحة على الخاصية الأنثوية المنطلقة من الجسد من خلال التوظيف الإبداعي للجوانب السردية. ومن ثم؛ يمكن استخدام هذه الدراسة نقطة انطلاق لإجراء المزيد من الدراسات والأبحاث حول السرد الأدبي لفرجينيا وولف إلى جانب السرد الحدائي للكاتبات الأخريات.

الكلمات المفتاحية : السرد الحدائي، الكتابة الأنثوية/ النسائية، الحركة النسوية الفرنسية، جسد المرأة، فرجينيا وولف، هيلين سيكسو.

Ebbs and Flows: Writing the Feminine in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract

This study explores the feminine aspects of Virginia Woolf's narrative in *To the Lighthouse* in the light of Hélène Cixous's feminine writing proposed in her controversial paper, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976). The paper attempts to show that Woolf's novel displays a unique narrative style that can be seen as anticipating the feminine quality of writing, which springs from the woman's experience of the body. Thus, the style of Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* is characterized by fluid narrative structures; amalgamation of poetic and personal narratives; representations of motherhood and open spatial and temporal boundaries, all of which express a feminine modality that characterises the writer's identity. The paper also explores such aesthetics of the feminine experience through the character of Lily Briscoe, an aspiring artist, upon whom Woolf projects the turmoil of the creation process in parallel with the experience of the writer herself. Through a close qualitative analysis of the novel, the paper aims at highlighting the precedence of the feminine narrative style of Woolf that was later advocated in the French Feminist theories of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva among others in the eighties of the past century. Thus, through examining Woolf's text from a different perspective, the research ultimately emphasizes the potential quality inherent in her narrative and modernist aesthetics which shape her identity as a creative writer and as a woman. In other words, the paper concludes that literary writing of women writers can provide narrative prototypes that are open to the feminine quality of the body through subversive employment of narrative aspects. Therefore, this research can be used as a springboard from which further research can be generated on Woolf's fiction as well as the works of other modernist women writers.

Keywords: Modernist narrative, *écriture féminine*, feminine writing, French Feminism,

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The modernist narrative of Virginia Woolf's renowned novel, *To the Lighthouse*, demonstrates an exemplary piece of feminine writing or *écriture féminine* as advanced in the writings of French feminists, such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Intrinsic to Woolf's style is a number of distinctive modernist features that seem to emulate the feminine qualities in the sense of *écriture féminine*. Such features can be traced in the flowing stream-of-consciousness narrative, use of elusive imagery, floating spatial and temporal boundaries as well as relentless endeavour to capture a moment or a design in both art and life. These features express a feminine modality that uniquely characterises Woolf's narrative. Her feminine practice of writing is paralleled with an intradiegetic artistic creation by her character, Lily Briscoe, a painter similarly involved in a creative enterprise of her own. Thus, the writer herself and her intra-narrative female artist synchronically share an experience of forging artistic identities by bringing words and colours into play. In this paper, Woolf's novel is viewed as typically anticipating many features of *écriture féminine*, which is derived from the woman's experience of the body. Hence, three aspects of *To the Lighthouse* will be explored. First, it will be argued that the novel is characterised by modernist femininity manifested in the diverse flowing narrative and vague imagery that amalgamate both poetic and personal impressions. Secondly, the representation of motherhood will be explored in relation to the narrative, and finally the paper will focus on the aesthetics of feminine creativity and art in the writer's expression of the feminine self both as an artist and as a human being.

Before exploring the affinity between Woolf's text and *écriture féminine*, it is significant to highlight some aspects of the theory proposed in the work of French feminists in the second half of the past century. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous proposes a feminine writing that "inscribes" female sexuality in all its for-long-repressed aspects as a way to liberate herself from the phallogocentric tradition: "she must write her 'self,' because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history". Such writing can be made possible by returning "to the body which has been more than confiscated from her" (880). Even though feminine writing defies theorization, it can be understood to be characterised by a unique experience of the female body and its drives, sexuality, fluidity, and openness, for women should explore their own space, their own world, "a world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions" (Cixous 876). Women, according to Cixous, can rely on inexhaustible resources to employ in their artistic endeavours: "women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible" (876). Thus, feminine writing celebrates the woman and her body in a mode that challenges previous rigid masculine establishments and envisions new forms of resistance.

Similarly, in her feminist approach which manifests in disrupting the paternal discourse of the symbolic, Julia Kristeva uses a semiotic discourse to account for *jouissance* subconsciously experienced by writers. Though her approach is mainly explored in her study of male writers such as Joyce and Mallarme, Kristeva views “certain liberatory potentials in [women’s] marginal position which is (admirably) unlikely to produce a fixed, authority-claiming subject/speaker or language” (Jones 249). Rather, in their challenge of existing discourses, women should resist things that are fixed, finite, definite or structured.

Apparently, Ann Rosalind Jones is one of the critics who highlighted the limitations of *écriture féminine* as lacking in historicity and failing to address real women’s struggles against patriarchal hegemony. Likewise, Toril Moi and Pamela McCallum dismiss any “exchange of signs between body and text” (Banting 1992). Despite these accusations and others of essentialism and distance from political engagement ascribed to post-structural French feminism, the significance of women finding new ways that speak of their sexual difference cannot be underestimated. In her rethinking of Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, Pamela Banting remarks that Cixous’s *écriture* is a process of translation rather than a representation of the woman’s body: “The poetic body, the body as pictogram, allows [Cixous] to hypothesize women’s writing as, in part, translation between language and corporeality” (231). In *Helen Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference*, Abigail Bray puts forward a reading of Cixous’s philosophy and explores specific literary texts to unlock the creative potential of her thoughts on literature. Bray views Cixous as subverting the avant-garde and providing a feminised manifesto of surrealism in which the mother is a “creative figure [...] whose energies are not husbanded by male power” (41).

Femininity and Modernism in *To the Lighthouse*

As an early feminist critic, Virginia Woolf seems to have found in the modernist aesthetic proclaimed in her essay “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” a potential to articulate a woman’s unprecedented writing experience (Lanser 1992). The innovative style and experimentation deployed in modernist writings allow more distinction between objective reality and subjective consciousness. In other words, modernist writing can be seen to have offered more space for examining the “depth of inner nature rather than look out upon society and the increasing uncertainties of the individual’s place within it” (Stevenson 61). Certainly, such potential is not particularly feminine taking into consideration the prominent association of male writers, such as Joyce, Pound and Eliot with the modernist enterprise. It is not difficult, however, to notice a greater connection of women writers with modernism than with classical realism. Leslie Fielder, among other critics, argues that “the whole ‘stream of consciousness’ movement is a return from an exaggeratedly masculine literature to a feminine one.”⁽¹⁾ In fact, through various

approaches, contemporary feminists “celebrate modernism as a movement open to the ‘feminine,’ to the ‘androgynous’ and cross-sexual, to patriarchal deconstruction, to Julia Kristeva’s ‘semiotic chora,’ to *écriture féminine*” (Lanser 103). Such affinity between femininity and modern aesthetics is clearly revelled in the work of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in which women writers are viewed as modernist prototypes (1).

Virginia Woolf suggests that the former traditional forms of writing are no longer sufficient to accommodate a woman’s experience. In *A Room of One’s own*, Woolf states that the sources of English language need to be explored and stretched to the limits in order to adequately describe a female’s own experience (86-7), a statement inadvertently resonating with *écriture féminine*. Woolf’s narrative style echoes attempts to delve into the reservoir of the English language to express her own thoughts in new and unprecedented ways. Her novel, *To the Lighthouse*, can offer a good example in which the female writer challenges the boundaries of language in ways that embody her “impassioned” drives by means of artistically powerful feminine art.

Accordingly, in order to explore the features of feminine writing inscribed in the modernist enterprise of Woolf’s text, it is imperative to trace the signs of celebrating the various impulses of the female body. Such impulses can be seen as featured in the fluid boundaries of the narrative structure, or rather the lack of structure, in the use of vague imagery as well as in the configurations of time and space. It is equally essential to examine the female voice through the veins of the text in ways pertinent to the feminine production of signification.

One feature of the feminine writing of the body is reflected in women writers’ ability to extend without limits. This feature is acquired by the woman’s bodily experience of “break[ing] loose” of “what is ours”; glances, laughs, smiles, and blood. In narrative, Cixous remarks: “we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we’re not afraid of lack” (878). Indeed, Woolf’s style displayed in her flowing stream-of-consciousness narrative that frequently lacks in clear-cut boundaries between the conscious extradiegetic narration and the flow of the characters’ subconscious minds seems to reflect this feminine quality Cixous is inviting. The narrator’s voice in *To the Lighthouse* indistinctly conflates with the characters’ consciousnesses, so both points of view merge and become indistinguishable from each other in long extended paragraphs of diverse syntax. It is essential to quote a lengthy piece of *To the Lighthouse* to illustrate this feature:

How then did it work out, all this? How did one judge people, think of them? How did one add up this and that and conclude that it was liking one felt, or disliking? And to those words, what meaning attached, after all? Standing now, apparently transfixed, by the pear tree, impressions

poured in upon her of those two men, and to follow her thought was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken by one's pencil, and the voice was her own voice saying without prompting undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things, so that even the fissures and humps on the bark of the pear tree were irrevocably fixed there for eternity. You have greatness, she continued, but Mr. Ramsay has none of it. He is petty, selfish, vain, egotistical; he is spoilt; he is tyrant; he wears Mrs. Ramsay to death; but he has what you (she addressed Mr. Bankes) have not; a fiery unworldliness; he knows nothing about trifles; he loves dogs and his children. He has eight. You have none. Did he not come down in two coats the other night and let Mrs. Ramsay trim his hair into a pudding basin? All of this danced up and down, like a company of gnats each separate, but all marvellously controlled in an invisible elastic net- danced up and down in Lily's mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree, where still hung in effigy the scrubbed kitchen table, symbol of her profound respect of Mr. Ramsay's mind, until her thought which had spun quicker and quicker exploded of its own intensity; she felt released; a shot went off close at hand, and their cam, flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings. (22-3)

In the above extract, the narrator apparently traces mental images which flow freely in an unbroken voice to express compellingly personal impressions and momentous sensations of life. Each mental image indiscriminately races with others in a net of elusive imagery that seems impossible to pin down in a traditional way of writing. The narrator's multi-layered impressions mingle indistinctly with Lily's short interrogative remarks and her mental comparison between Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Bankes. In other words, the thoughts seem to have been released in a gush of an unrestrained flow. In her introduction to the Vintage version of *To the Lighthouse*, Eavan Boland comments on the narrative style of Woolf, which does not hold back whatever in the writer's mind:

To the Lighthouse is full of sinuous, impossible music: a rhythmic quicksand of subordinate clauses and dropped meanings on each of which we stand for a moment, and then move away quickly, trying for a solid ground that never materializes. (xi)

Such an insecure land of uncertainties seen in Woolf's extending stream of consciousness echoes her understanding of the complexity of human mind and its assimilation of the ambivalence of life as we can understand it. But metaphorically, it is also an embodiment of a style that seeks breaking out of the limits. In other words, it is a technique that relatively liberates the writer from a sense of confinement the use

of traditional narration may foster. This is undeniably a practice by which Woolf can unfold new sources of English language to communicate her own feminine experience of writing.

To write the feminine in the text, Cixous remarks, a woman writer has to articulate the diverse and multiple meanings driven from “the infinite and mobile complexity” of her body. A woman “lets [her body], with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor . . . articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction” (885). In spite of its ambiguous connotation, such a feminine style can be seen best reflected in *To the Lighthouse* through the affluent imagery and plethoric meanings implied in Woolf’s narrative and diverse style. Woolf plays on the subtle allusions implied in her rich imagery; she admittedly defies attaching any fixed meaning to her symbols. In a letter to her friend Roger Fry, Woolf states that she “meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse,” a statement that opens and extends its meaning as well as the connotation of other relevant symbols in the text. In fact, the lighthouse remains the most interesting polemic that marks Woolf’s work. In the same letter to Fry, Woolf states: “I can’t manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalized way. [...] directly I’m told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.”⁽²⁾ Clearly, for her, once the meaning is fixed, the thing loses its value; it only maintains its value as long as the meaning is tantalizingly elusive, mysterious and multiple like the woman’s body and mind.

Thus, what makes Woolf approximate the feminine poetics of writing is her ambivalent, ever changing symbolism. It is true that she wants to keep her “lighthouse” vague by withholding any specific meaning as she claims in her diary, but on the level of narrative, her most significant emblem also resists signification; or rather signifies the un-representable. In fact, so many metaphors of the lighthouse unstoppably clash and reconcile to the point of no meaning at all. First, the lighthouse represents some unattainable promise to the child in the opening lines of the novel. Then the lighthouse seems to protrude harshly to Mrs. Ramsay’s view while taking a walk with Charles Tansley to the post office. Listening but not actually catching the meaning of his masculine speech and jargons, she exclaims upon viewing the scene:

“Oh, how beautiful!” for the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men.

(11-12)

In a total paradox with the feminine image of the welcoming flowing dunes, the lighthouse with its austerity and distance as well as with its physical protruding shape represents

a masculine image. The contrasting images may easily correspond to the masculine/feminine opposition of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay a few pages later “and into the delicious fecundity, this fountain and spray of life, the fatal sterility of the male plunged itself, like a beak of brass, barren and bare” (34). But the lighthouse is also a source of feminine presence, for its persistently-searching fluid light implies some feminine qualities of inquisitiveness, beauty, and nurture.⁽³⁾ In an introspective moment, the strokes of light meet the conscious mind of Mrs. Ramsay and become one with her:

She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart [...]. She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light. It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things [...]; felt they expressed one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one. (59)

In spite of this uncanny mutual understanding and unity with the light, this relationship changes with just a passage of a little time. Next morning “with some irony in her interrogation [...] she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her” (60). Not only do the feminine and masculine qualities keep trespassing on one another, but the light of the lighthouse presents an ironical paradox of fascination and apprehension. If this paradox has to mean anything at all, it may account for Woolf’s feminine aesthetics that Cixous endows with pervasive, flying, volatile, ever-changing qualities. It also accounts for the dissolution of meaning as Woolf metaphorically makes the lighthouse “become almost invisible” melting “away into a blue haze” at the end of the narrative (197). Hence, this approach of semantic diversities becomes intrinsic to Woolf’s feminine identity and perception of the world.

Woolf’s tendency to diversity can furthermore be seen in the use of multiple sources in her creation of *To the Lighthouse*. Basically, the novel is an exuberant mixture of the writer’s poetic fiction and life sketches: “this is going to be fairly short; to have father’s character done complete in it; and mother’s and St. Ives” (*Diary* 76). Given the fact that her novel is not purely fictional, it can be seen as reflecting her own philosophy of life and its relationship to narrative and art. Narratologist, Paul Ricour proposes that “self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation” (114). Apparently, in Ricoeurian understanding, Woolf employs narrative, borrowing from her own personal history, to interpret herself and to mediate her own understanding of herself. Woolf weaves her history into the novel in a vibrant narrative, which pulsates with personal impressions as well as with creative sketches of the fictional Ramsays’ life. This amalgamation of poetic and autobiographical elements in the flow of the narrative

is disrupting to any “unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces” (Cixous 882). Writing becomes “a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another” (882). Woolf’s unforgettable moments of childhood in St. Ives, her severance from her mother, and her complicated relationship with her father are inscribed within the fictional account of the Ramsay family. But most important of all is the mother who remains significant in a woman’s personal history.

Representations of Motherhood

Indeed, the inscription of the mother is a significant feature of Cixous’ *écriture féminine*. A woman writer sustains a fortifying bond with that “other woman”/the mother for “there always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other—in particular, the other woman” (881). In fact, the mother is predominant in Woolf’s both fictional and autobiographical narratives. *To the Lighthouse* dramatises Woolf’s attempts to capture the mother on two levels. On the signifying level, Woolf desires to describe, write and rewrite the mother who has remained for long an overwhelming presence in the writer’s life. Severed from the mother due to her early death, Woolf’s narrative is preoccupied with an oceanic presence of the mother. Despite continuous effort to break from the mother, the writer has maintained an emotional and psychotic attachment. Her autobiographical memoir, “A Sketch of the Past,” portrays a fragmented picture of her mother, Julia Stephen, by means of spontaneous recollection of her childhood and adolescence. The mother seems to have been a dispersed presence that resists traditional signification by means of writing. Woolf writes in her Sketch, “I suspect the word ‘central’ gets closest to the general feeling I had of living so completely in her atmosphere that one never got far enough away from her to see her as a person” (Sketch 83). *To the Lighthouse* is the writer’s attempt to recapture such dispersed presence of her mother in the character of Mrs. Ramsay.

In her significant sociological study on motherhood, Nancy Chodorow argues that women maintain lifelong relationships with their mothers and never completely become separate from them (67-8). Therefore, such an endurable mother-daughter relationship defines the feminine experience of the self. For Woolf, the mother has been an overwhelming presence rather than an/other person that can be easily defined. In writing about the relationship with their mothers, Suzanne Juhasz suggests that daughters attempt a search for recognition. The desire to write about the first relationship with the m/other seems to be very compelling and necessary. It is through recognizing the mother by the daughter’s writing about the mother, a daughter becomes able to make art.⁽⁴⁾

On another level, *To the Lighthouse* represents another attempt to capture the mother by employing more experimental means of visualizing the mother. Her

surrogate artist, the painter Lily Briscoe, wants to picture the mother on her canvas by means of colours and shapes. In this regard, both artists, the writer and the painter, seem to undergo progressive attempts to create a distinct image of the m/other using their creative skills in order to articulate their own subjects as distinct from others. Here, Woolf dramatises the challenge implied in the creative process by her artist character, Briscoe who, like Woolf, is engaged in an endeavour to picture the mother on the white canvas. Mrs. Ramsay is the centre of 'The Window,' the first and the largest chapter of the novel. Literally, she is at the centre of the window for Lily's painting. Not only does she appear to be the comforting and soothing mother who keeps assuring her children about the promised journey to the lighthouse, but her matriarchal presence extends to affect all the people around her including her guests. Significantly, she acts as a harmonizing agent who brings everyone together at the dinner party. The omnipotent presence of the mother in the first part of the book is superseded in the second by the *presence* of a lost mother. The void of the middle characterless section, the description of the bleak house, and the deserted mirrors which reflect no faces are manifestations of such loss in "Time Passes". The last chapter emphasizes on the final attempt of reshaping and recreating an allegorical form of a mother: the mother on the painter's canvas. It culminates with Lily completing her vision, which concurs with the arrival of Mr. Ramsay and the children to the lighthouse: "with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was finished. Yes, she thought, [...] I have had my vision" (198). With Lily having finally captured the mother (Mrs. Ramsay) on the canvas in her surreal style, the writer's vision that transcends both time and space has also been completed.

According to Cixous, women are always empowered and nurtured by the mother, for the "first music from the first voice of love" is an element which "never stops resonating" in women's speech and writing (881). Apparently, in Woolf's novel, the mother is not only present in Mrs. Ramsay's character, but she is also mystically inscribed in the imagery and the narrative as a whole. It is difficult to ignore, for example, the association between the maternal presence and the sea early in the novel. Not only are both the mother and the sea continually and overwhelmingly present in the narrative "obscured and concealed under the other sounds," but they mysteriously connect with each other on different levels (15). In a child-mother moment of Mrs. Ramsay smoothing her boy's hair, the narrator expresses such a remarkable affinity between Mrs. Ramsay and the sea:

The monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature. "I am guarding you- I am

your support.” (14-15)

The rhythmic sound of the waves seems to coincide with the maternal impulse; the sea itself becomes a natural matriarch with its eternal reassuring song. This association can be compared to a distant memory of childhood disclosed in Woolf’s autobiographical sketch:

It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind. (64)

This memory is part of Woolf’s reminiscent recollection of her own mother. If this memory were to be put in juxtaposition with a previous one of the writer’s as a child, being on her mother’s lap, the link between the soothing sound of the sea heard from the nursery and the mother’s soothing voice becomes clear. Hence, the mother becomes a “metaphor,” and the maternal voice with its “streams of song” produces in the writer her impulsive woman’s style (Cixous 882). For it is, as Cixous proclaims, “what touches you, the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laughs you; the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible and desirable” (882). In other words, the feminine language of the female body and the mother opens the narrative to a space of affluent metaphors that mimic the boundless flow of the female body.

Aesthetics of Feminine Narrative and Creativity

A significant feature of feminine writing can be manifested in movement and change. This is what Cixous identifies as flying: “flying in language and making it fly” (887). Utilizing the double meaning of the verb *voler*, as both flying and stealing, women, for Cixous, “take pleasure in jumbling order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down” (887). Accordingly, the complex representations of temporal and spatial relationships can be very useful in understanding the narrator’s consciousness that reflect such feminine modality of change, flying and instability. The plot of Woolf’s novel seems to be revolving around human ties within the congregation of the Ramsay family and their guests on the Isle of Skye. The narrative remarkably examines those complex relationships from a status of postponement of the promised journey to the lighthouse. In anticipation of the deferred event, and the deferred meaning (since the narrative resists fixed meaning in a Derridean sense), the plot is weaved to represent life in its most complex junctures and death as an inevitable counterpart.

The spatial and temporal connotations implied in the titles of the chapters also help to understand the chronotopic features of change. In the first chapter entitled “The Window,” Mrs. Ramsay looks out most of the time through a window which belongs to a duality of space, both inside and outside, and echoes alternating views of the inner world of the mind and the outer world of human relationships. “Time Passes” dramatises the transience of human beings and the ever-changing state of life. It connects and balances the contrasting elements of absence and presence employed in both the preceding chapter and the following one. The last section entitled “To the Lighthouse” moves forward and backwards in time and space; whereas the boat advances across the sea towards the lighthouse, the narrative moves backwards in memory to the past to recapture the image of lost Mrs. Ramsay in Briscoe’s mind. Literally, the title of the chapter represents a progressive movement towards a destination; somewhere or some vision that puts an end to both the journey and the narrative. The Progression towards the lighthouse is paralleled with a search of some kind; both parties (the boat and Briscoe) are seeking something that is going to be an achievement on the personal level. Both scenes of achievement (Mr. Ramsay arriving at the lighthouse and Lily’s final momentous strokes of her painting) are alternately communicated by the narrative in a way that each scene becomes a *sine qua non* of the other:

“He must have reached it,” said Lily Briscoe aloud, feeling suddenly completely tired out. For the Lighthouse had become almost invisible, had melted away into a blue haze, and the effort of looking at it and the effort of thinking of him landing there, which both seemed to be one and the same effort, had stretched her body and mind to the utmost. (197)

It is an image of consonance, whereas the physical efforts of reaching the lighthouse exhaust the painter both watching the scene from the shore and introjecting a similar sense of achievement.

The lack of spatial clarity is also inherent in the imagery of water and light, which is employed to dramatise the fluidity and unsettledness of human consciousness as well as that of the female body. The sea is a constant presence intruding on the lives of people on the Isle of Skye, soothing them at times and threatening them at others: “it was as if the water floated off and set sailing thoughts which had grown stagnant on dry land and gave to their bodies even some sort of physical relief” (18). The “mother of pearl” becomes a source of inspiration flushing away old thoughts and rejuvenating both the mind and the body with its flooded-with-colour waves. At other times, the sound of the sea seems to threaten the continuity of life and to remind human beings of their transience and short life once “[the] ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea . . . [and] that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow” (15). These two contrasting

views of the sea correspond to the duality of life and death; of carnival and mourning; of presence and absence, which anticipate the recurrent themes of the novel.

Even at moments of utmost joy when life is celebrated the most, death remains a daunting reality that threatens to change the *status quo* of things. Looking at the triumphant celebratory feast, “a curious sense” rises in Mrs. Ramsay; a sense that is “at once freakish and tender . . . for what could be more serious than the love of man for woman, what more commanding, more impressive, bearing in its bosom the seeds of death” (93). This synchrony of life and death envisioned by Mrs. Ramsay is not only a reminder of Woolf’s philosophy but also a quality Woolf endows to the sea as well as to the mother. Therefore, if we are to associate the sea with the mother again, the perspective of the sea as both soothing and threatening, giving life as well as death can also correspond to both the necessity of the mother for a healthy nurture and the danger implied in the inability to separate from her.

Relevantly, the flow of the sea seems to echo the chaotic state of consciousness preceding moments of creation. The difficulties involved in the process of creation an artist, and by extension a writer, goes through are dramatised adroitly in the text. Struggling to begin her painting on the lawn, Lily Briscoe introjects the state of the sea in paralleled agitation. She contemplates:

one line placed on the canvas committed her to innumerable risks, to frequent and irrevocable decisions. All that in idea seemed simple became in practice immediately complex; as the waves shape themselves symmetrically from the cliff top, but to the swimmer among them are divided by steep gulfs, and foaming crests. (150)

For Lily, to begin an artistic enterprise is to endanger oneself to peril. Starting a new project is similar to starting an adventure, taking a plunge in the wild sea in which one has to achieve balance in order to make the first stroke. “The hollow of one wave” followed by another draws her to think of the “formidable” space on her canvas and makes her aware of “the presence of this formidable ancient enemy of hers- this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly laid hands on her emerged stark at the back of appearances and commanded her attention” (151). Evidently, the imagery implied in these words emulates a state of labour, a pre-birth trauma in that prehistoric blackness of the mother’s body. Such struggle heralds a new beginning, a breaking from the body of the m/other and a birth of a new self. This sense of new birth is literally manifested in the description of Lily’s feeling before she takes her decisive stroke:

Always (it was in her nature, or in her sex, she did not know which) before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of *nakedness* when she seemed like an *unborn*

soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubts. (151) [emphasis mine]

In comparison, Lily clearly expresses the pain involved in the creation process earlier, even though when the idea can be seen “so clearly, so commandingly”; it is “this passage from conception to work” that is “as dreadful as any *down a dark passage of child*” (17-18) [emphasis mine]. Noticeably, the labour prior to the moment of creation, similar to that of a mother’s before the birth of her child, marks an artist’s experience. Her “extreme fatigue” once she gives birth to her own vision endorses this notion (198). This imagery can be seen as a translation of the female voice that should spring from a woman’s natural impulses and experience of the body because, as Cixous proposes, a woman’s “body knows unheard-of songs” (876). The “concentration of painting” should result from “fluidity”; shape should spring from a state of shapelessness in order for Lily to “give form to its movement” (883). What Lily seeks is a moment of being, that is “immune from change” similar to the one Mrs. Ramsay is able to achieve at the dinner party “there is a coherence in things, a stability; something she meant, is immune from change, and shines out . . . in the face of flowing, the fleeting, the spectral . . .” (97).

In the progression towards such articulation of the self, the young artist has to go through this incessant process of subject formation and reformation known in Kristeva’s terminology as abjection: a challenging process of defining the boundaries of the subject, by facing and excluding what is other to oneself.⁽⁵⁾ The intruding features of the sea with its ebbs and flows onto Lily’s consciousness can be seen as emblematic of the artist’s fluctuating boundaries in the process of subject formation:

With a curious physical sensation, as if she were urged forward and at the same time must hold herself back, she made her first quick decisive stroke. The brush descended. It flickered brown over the white canvas; it left a running mark. A second time she did it – a third time. And so pausing and so flickering . . .; and so, lightly and swiftly pausing, striking, she scored her canvas with brown running nervous lines which had no sooner settled there than they enclosed (she felt it looming out at her) a space. Down in the hollow of one wave she saw the next wave towering higher and higher above her. For what could be more formidable than that space? (151)

The artist is fully aware of the difficulties involved in capturing or representing reality. Her continuous efforts which extend throughout the whole novel echo Woolf’s perspective on life and art. Human beings are continually striving for knowledge, understanding, design and stability, which may never be achieved in a lifetime. Art and narrative are routes through which an artist and a writer aspire to understand life that keeps resisting

wholeness: "Life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach" (44). This is how Lily, and by extension her creator, understands life incidents, similar to the random strokes of her brush, they keep resisting coherence and wholeness even though there is a shape she can see under the colours. Knowing people is an impossibility for they are like beehives that cannot be penetrated. Lily seeks to decipher the inscriptions in the hidden chambers of Mrs. Ramsay, "what art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers?" (47). Yet, Lily desires the ultimate type of knowledge through her relationship with Mrs. Ramsay, something intangible to men,

for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee. (47)

This female intimacy with another woman that defies theorization seems to transcribe the feminine experience, which "will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system" (Cixous 883).

In moments of spatial and temporal bewilderment, Lily's painting appears to take her backwards to the past in the final scene while the boat is taking Mr. Ramsay and the children forwards to the lighthouse; to the future. Woolf endeavours to shape her own artistic identity by developing a feminine narrative that features her conception of the self. Her proto artist's struggle echoes the writer's restless style employed in the narrative. The continuous identification with and separation from the mother, for example, express the female desire to remain attached and to break from the mother; that force which keeps attracting and repelling women. Those desires and drives mark Woolf's narrative not only in the feminine metaphors and attachments to the mother but also in their defiance to a stable shape.

Woolf's subversive narrative which echoes the feminine style proposed by Cixous can be seen as a distillation of the writer's understanding of the human nature and experiences as well as of the nature of art. But it can also be viewed as an attempt "to invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes", for a woman writer "must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence'" (Cixous 886). In her elegiac narrative, Woolf's experimentation with words, syntax and imagery reflects her aesthetics of feminine narrative and creativity that are paralleled in the surreal impressionistic colours and lines on Briscoe's canvas. Moments of achievements are epiphanic moments of being

against the flux of life and narrative; they can only momentarily defy change in an ever-changing state of being. The rhythmic pulse of light as well as the monotonous sound of the waves, which seem to be always at work in the background of the story, are reminders of the continuous flow of life against which artistic and narrative experiences make their imprints. Thus, art, and by extension writing, becomes a means of survival or as Cixous puts it “a way for leaving no space for death” (Coming to Writing 3). It becomes more understandable that Woolf’s “inability to read and write” as she put in her suicidal note, is the artist’s justification for ending her own life (Snaith 42).

Notes

- (1) See Leslie Fielder, forward to Caesar R. Blake. *Dorothy Richardson* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1960), x.
- (2) See Virginia Woolf, “To Roger Fry.” 27 May 1927. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*.
- (3) Few critics have noted the heterogeneous/androgynous connotations of Woolf’s imagery of the lighthouse. See, for example, Fusini 224.
- (4) See Suzanne Juhasz, *A Desire for Women: Relational Psychoanalysis, and Relationships between Women* (New Brunswick; London: Rutgers University Press, 2003).
- (5) See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1982).

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