

The Journey of Self-Discovery and Wholeness in *To the Light House*: From the 'Body for Others' to the 'Visionary Body'

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Abstract

Having been defined as an 'incomplete man' or an 'incidental being' that lacks certain qualities, women have gradually internalized the patriarchal ideology, claiming that they are essentially insufficient. Considering themselves as the insignificant 'Other' in relation to men, women are full of self-loathing and shame over their bodies. Thus, always seeking men's approval, women drown out the inner voice of their bodies and resort to being 'the body for others'. However, for Woolf, it is a self-destruction not a salvation. She claims women have to get rid of those docile bodies and disembodied minds to be able to take control of their own lives cleared from all the social constraints, society constructed gender roles and patriarchal demands. For Woolf, this is only possible when women assert themselves through their bodies, thereby realizing a new sense of being inside themselves that is powerful and autonomous ready to actualize its potential. Therefore, basing its argument on those assertions of Virginia Woolf and one of her most influential novels, *To the Lighthouse*, this study puts forward women's body image largely influenced by phallogocentric world and its typical patriarchal system can be challenged and subverted through the 'visionary body' that enables women to achieve the unique process of self-discovery and wholeness.

Keywords: phallogocentric order, patriarchy, gendered body/body for others, fluid body/visionary body, semiotic chora, de(con)struction

Introduction

Aptly-named as "a psychological poem" (Woolf, 1982, p. 102) by Leonard Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (TTL, henceforth) is considered by many critics to be one of the most influential novels written by Virginia Woolf. Moreover, since perhaps Woolf has woven a great deal of her personal experiences and unresolved issues with her deceased parents into the novel, *To the Lighthouse* is accepted as a semi-autobiographical work. In this masterpiece, Woolf aims to discharge that intensified psychic energy with two main characters based on her parents: Sir Leslie Stephen, who provides a model for Mr. Ramsay, "... sitting in a boat, reciting *We Perished, Each Alone*, while he crushes a dying mackerel" (Woolf, 1982, p. 75), and Julia Stephen, a model for Mrs. Ramsay, staying "there... in the very center... from the very first" (Woolf, 1985, p. 81). Woolf, obsessed with her parents, admits that she has to write this novel, *To the Lighthouse*, to release herself from them, especially from her mother:

I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her. I suppose that I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest (1985, p. 81).

Therefore, *To the Lighthouse* is a kind of journey for Woolf, a metaphoric journey to her own past, to the maternal space and semiotics from the phallogocentric symbolic order. In fact, Woolf has to set out on that journey to distinguish her self-identity from that of her identity with the mother, but she cannot resist the attraction of this complex relationship and always finds herself being drawn "into its orbit not only as a daughter but as a writer" (Rosenman, 1986, p.15). Thus, like in many other works, Woolf aims to regress back to the beginning, also in *To the Lighthouse*, to re-experience and re-create the early experiences of semiotic chora full of ecstasy and rapture. As she writes in *Moments of Being*, achieving that satisfaction "is only a question of discovering how we can get ourselves again attached to it, so that we shall be able to live our lives through from the start" (1985, p.67). Briefly, by descending into a realm of semiotic fluid that spilled over the restraints of symbolic language, Woolf seeks the secret essence that she carries within her throughout the novel, particularly in relation to the mother, represented by Mrs. Ramsay.

The question here is that why the relation to the mother and her maternal body is so crucial for Woolf to be able to create a less sexist and less phallogocentric model for women. According to her, women, who have been the objects of male theorizing, male desires, male fears and male representations for ages, have to reclaim their usurped bodies and silenced voices back. For this aim, they have to create both a new female language and a new politics. However, it is a challenging process since the system of the patriarchal language and its hegemonic powers have penetrated into almost every field of experience. The obvious place to begin is the silent place, the 'dark continent', as Helene Cixous points out:

The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. – It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack (1976, p.884-85).

For Freud and Lacan, women are excluded from any available connection with culture and the cultural order as they lack any relation to the phallus, the 'transcendental signifier'. According to them, female subjects, not having the phallus, cannot signify speech and desire, because all individuals must symbolize their desire in terms of the male penis. Hence, women acquire a split identity and self-understanding as they are merely considered speechless objects of male desire. In order to move beyond the limitations of this oppressive formulation of desire, with its basis in the Oedipal conflict, and achieve their unity again, women must listen to the call of the chora; an echo reminiscent of original bliss, or the "semiotic chora", a term for the 'enclosed space, womb' or 'receptacle' that Kristeva derives from Plato's *Timaeus* (Kristeva, 1984).

During the time of infancy, there is no sense of separation from the body of the mother. The infant and mother are one and whole. There is no self, no other, no this or that; everything is one and the same. Their world is composed entirely of sensations elaborating wholeness and jouissance. As there is no absence, there is also no need for language. Thus, the concept of 'other' is not conceivable to the infant yet. However, this situation significantly changes once patriarchy reaches his hands to the child. The process of othering starts both for the child and the mother: s/he becomes an 'Other' to the mother and the mother turns into the 'm/other', a selfless object, whose sole reason for existence is to gratify the wants and needs of the family. The child views the mother not as a person but as an object who fails to give her/him what s/he desires from her. Acquiring the 'Law of the Father', the child becomes a subject of the system (Lacan, 1977) and loses the union with the mother. The feeling of wholeness producing laughter disappears gradually, and "the child's laughter [becomes] one of a past event" (Kristeva, 1980, p.283). Therefore, the entrance of the child to the Father's law means both separation from the mother and losing touch with the semiotic chora; as clarified in the following:

Once the subject has entered into the Symbolic Order, the chora will be more or less successfully repressed and can be perceived only as pulsional pressure on symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language. The chora is a rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language. It constitutes, in other words, ... the disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory (Moi, 1996, p.162).

Even though a person loses touch with the semiotic in the symbolic stage, the chora is always there for her/him. The mother's voice has been repressed, though, not silenced. It is present but defined as "an invisible, formless being, a mysterious" (Irigaray, 1985, p.307) within the patriarchal discourse. In order to re-experience the sensations, experiences, and most importantly the wholeness of the chora, the tightly wound structures of phallogocentric discourse and its man-made language must be unraveled, because all of these have been formed to separate one from the mother. By re-uniting with the chora, in which there are no binaries or hierarchies but only unity and harmony, one can create a new world, where the Law of the Father does not count. It is not a utopian dream as there was such a place once in everyone's life: the pre-symbolic period, where the child is one with the m/other.

Therefore, Woolf claims that the other, which is at the same time the mother, is the source of de(con)structing everything related with the phallogocentric discourse: its cultural norms, laws, language, and power. Once women get to the other side of the looking glass and become one with their image, instead of seeing it from the outside as an 'other', their female language will be brought into the foreground of consciousness. Eventually, the female language finds its source, the m/other's body, "mak[ing] everything all right, nourish[ing] and stand[ing] up against separation" (Cixous, 1976, p.882). This poetic female language, coming from the 'semiotic chora/the maternal body' eliminates the dominating sense of the symbolic and lets women overcome their initial silence and express themselves outside the bounds of phallogocentric signification.

The Voice(s) of M/other: Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe

Mrs. Ramsay, like Julia Stephen, is a typical Victorian woman who has sacrificed herself for the sake of her husband and children. She is the 'Angel in the House', who "warmed and soothed" (*TTL*, p.41) everybody around her with her maternal realm, especially her children, who long for the secure world of the chora and semiotics. She is the looking glass, "possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (Woolf, 1929, p.30) not just for her husband, Mr. Ramsay, desiring "to be assured of his genius, ... to be taken within the circle of life, ... to have his senses restored" (*TTL*, p.32), but she also provides solace to her guests:

[Mr. Tansley] should have been a great philosopher, said Mrs. Ramsay, ... but he had made an unfortunate marriage. It flattered him; snubbed as he had been, it soothed him that Mrs. Ramsay should tell him this. Charles Tansley revived. Insinuating, too, as she did the greatness of man's intellect, even in its decay, ... she made him feel better pleased with himself than he had done yet (*TTL*, p.9).

Despite all her efforts of self-sacrifice and surrender, Mrs. Ramsay is sometimes faced with dilemmas and serious doubts about her marriage. In some certain moments, "when, in a state of mind..., half plaintive, half resentful, she seemed unable to surmount the tempest calmly, or to laugh as they laughed, but in her weariness perhaps concealed something. She brooded and sat silent" (*TTL*, p. 168). She thinks that her entire life is in vain. In fact, Mrs. Ramsay feels like she has a split personality represented by two kinds of body – the 'body for others', "the body cast in social roles and bound by the laws of social interaction", and the 'visionary body', "a second physical presence in fundamental respects different from the gendered body constituted by the dominant social order" (Hite, 2000, p.1). When she is alone and isolates herself from everything – her husband, children and chores – she feels that her visionary body "offer[s] an inviolable place for momentary but definitive experience" (Hite, 2000, p.17). In those times, Mrs. Ramsay sees the light reflected from the lighthouse:

... the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call ..., but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough! (*TTL*, p.54).

With the touching of the light, Mrs. Ramsay has reached beyond the limits of a 'dark continent', which has been defined as uncanny and a threatening place for women by the phallogocentric tradition. However, there, she experiences jouissance and freedom, not fear and uncertainty. She feels as if her body was fluid, which cannot be controlled or shaped. Unfortunately, this 'exquisite happiness and ecstasy' do not last long, because Mr. Ramsay, regarding his wife just as a body that merely belongs to him, realizes the change in Mrs. Ramsay. He senses the threat of her new 'fluid body', which will "deform, propagate, evaporate, consume him, to flow out of him and into another who cannot easily be held on to" (Irigaray, 1985, p.237). Fearing the loss of his authority over his wife, Mr. Ramsay turns up the heat. All the strength and energy of Mrs. Ramsay is absorbed "by the beak of brass, the arid scimitar of the male, which smote mercilessly, again and again, demanding sympathy" (*TTL*, p.32). Very soon, she cannot resist being the 'body for others', and her quest for truth ends in unconditional surrender to Mr. Ramsay, like "a bride to meet her lover" (*TTL*, p.53). In that way, by letting her husband exploit her body, Mrs. Ramsay has no staying power and dies unexpectedly.

By exemplifying two different bodily experiences of Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf tries to prove how the phallogocentric world and its typical patriarchal system mold and ideologically program women's bodies. With this controlling idea in her mind, she challenges and subverts women's body image largely influenced by false assumptions of male opinions, and creates sensuous and passionate female characters who remain aloof from the unresolved problems of motherhood and love affairs. These female characters, having the modernist body, or in other words, the 'visional body', represent "an inspired solution to the problems of women's culturally sanctioned vulnerability" (Hite, 2000, p.6). Woolf creates that body, "sealed off from social consequences, secure from interruption or invasion" (Hite, 2000, p.6), through the character 'Lily'. Unlike Mrs. Ramsay, representing the typical Victorian woman, Lily does not align with the ideologies of the mentioned period. She is "an independent little creature" (*TTL*, p.15), who deals with art and artistic creation instead of getting married and having children. In this respect, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf has laid foundations for transforming the patriarchal 'docile body' into the 'fluid body' that cannot be controlled or shaped, and kills the 'Angel' in the house and creates the female modernist body, or in other words, the 'visionary body' so as to reach the states of enlightenment and transcendence.

Women, defined as an 'incomplete man' or an 'incidental being' that lacks certain qualities, have internalized the patriarchal ideology, claiming that women are essentially insufficient. Considering themselves as the insignificant 'Other' in relation to men, who are the 'Absolute', women are full of self-loathing and shame over their bodies. Thus, always seeking men's approval, women drown out the inner voice of their bodies and resort to being 'the body for others'. However, for Woolf, it is a self-destruction not a salvation. She claims women have to get rid of those docile bodies and disembodied minds to be able to take control of their own lives cleared from all the social constraints, society constructed gender roles and patriarchal demands; that is, from all the reductive systems of masculine confinement and oppressive language. For Woolf, this is only possible when women assert themselves through their bodies, as it is "one's body feeling, not one's mind" (*TTL*, p.148). She believes that once a woman reclaims her body, she eventually realizes a new sense of being inside her that is powerful and autonomous ready to actualize its potential as a whole and healthy person. Thus, Woolf encourages women to resist the patriarchal representations of their bodies and accept the fact that their body is an essential aspect of self-expression.

Correspondingly, Lily, who cannot complete her painting however hard she tries, understands that she needs a new way to express her feelings and spiritual energy, which is not controlled through the moral codes of phallogocentrism and its man-made language. This new way is her body, as the place of self-expression, as Woolf states in *A Room of One's Own*: "No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle (1929, p. 65). Realizing this fact, Lily stops considering her body as an obstacle and sets it free:

Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and umbers, moving her brush hither and thither, ... with some rhythm which was dictated to her. ... she lost consciousness of outer things, and her name and her personality and her appearance, ... her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues (*TTL*, p. 134).

Only when Lily decides to trace her body does she feel the rhythm of her 'visional body', and trembles in "a painful but exciting ecstasy" (*TTL*, p.132). Gradually, with the help of those rhythms, what seems like "ghost, air, nothingness ... a center of complete emptiness" (*TTL*, p.149) at the beginning of her journey becomes clear, and Lily lifts the veil of the mystery. Now, she understands very well that this "white space" is the maternal body, which is a rich and fertile terrain for creation. Realizing this fact, Lily decides to find her lost mother and re-establish the dual union through which she can obtain the feeling of wholeness and creative spirit, because only then she will be able to complete her masterpiece, which is not "single and solitary births; ... but the outcome of many years of thinking in common" (Woolf, 1929, p.55) (italic is mine). Desiring to seek a mode of representation outside of the father's symbolic universe, the only way for Lily to explore and describe the archaic and primary relation to 'the maternal feminine' (Irigaray, 1985) is to paint in 'white ink'. For this purpose, she affiliates with her figurative mother, Mrs. Ramsay, who will nourish her with all that she needs.

Conclusion

In fact, by focusing on the reintegration with the lost mother and her maternal body, Woolf aims to de(con)struct the ignorant patriarchal gaze over the mother-daughter and/or woman to woman relationship in *To the Lighthouse*, because she believes that women are "confidantes, ... mothers and daughters" (Woolf, 1929, p.69). To clarify the problems of the patricentric texts, she interrogates Freud and Lacan's arguments on the pre-Oedipal structure, and prognosticates the matricentric theory as a gateway to the symbolic register (Abel,1989). Unlike Freud and Lacan, advocating the complete separation from a mother for a successful individuation, Woolf believes that nothing is required to be repressed. She identifies the fourth dimension of human life in which one can obtain the lost unity with the mother again: "I mean: I: & the not I: & the outer & the inner [...] New combinations in psychology & body – rather like painting" (Woolf, 1982, p.353). What Woolf emphasizes with the fourth dimension is the mother's womb, or the chora, "a receptacle of all becoming" (Kristeva, 1980, p.38) that offers equal chances to both sexes. It is not a place of emptiness or mystery but a place of production. When Lily comes to term with this fact, she "[goes] on tunneling her way into her picture, into the past" (*TTL*, p. 145), like Woolf does during her creation process. There, she returns to the pre-oedipal phase of 'unity' with the mother and identifies with Mrs. Ramsay, representing the mother archetype that promises the primordial unity. With this unification, Lily Briscoe resolves her own insecurities and comes to peace with the memory of the deceased Mrs. Ramsay. Now, it is the right time for Lily to complete her painting:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision (*TTL*, p.176).

Lily finishes her painting just after “peace had come” (*TTL*, p. 120). She, at last, finds the way to express her body’s feelings that have been inexpressible before, and transforms what seems indefinite and absent into the certitude and properness of a vision. In other words, Lily succeeds in making “the shadow on the step” (*TTL*, p. 170) visible and turns it into a sign of presence. It is not just somebody but Mrs. Ramsay, the primary source of everything. She is still part of the “picture” Lily seeks. Thus, by catching the essence of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe finally manages to conceptualize Woolf’s vision at the end of the novel. She transfers what she sees into a form. That is, she makes visible the world’s invisible form by uncovering the language of art. That language, purified from the patriarchal ideologies and male gaze, erases all the binaries and creates a new image of the female body defined by female experience. It puts an end to the rule of phallic authority and logocentrism over the female body, and lets this visual body assert itself in Lily and her attitude towards life and art. Her body, urged by “a curious physical sensation” (*TTL*, p. 133) to paint, connects with the rhythms of the mother’s womb, or the semiotic chora that always ensures peace and truth along with the primordial unity. Through this unity and the pre-linguistic experience with the mother, Lily Briscoe ascertains her transcendent vision and manages to reach the maternal jouissance, the source of aesthetic revolution, and violates the constraints of the symbolic discourse by “connect[ing] the mass on the right hand with that on the left” (*TTL*, p. 44) (the italic is mine).

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