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**Gender Consciousness and Representation in  
Virginia Woolf's Writing in Light of Contemporary  
Feminism and Gender Theory**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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V Praze, 16. července 2017

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## **Introduction**

This thesis analyses Virginia Woolf's novels and non-fiction from the standpoint of several recent trends in feminism and contemporary gender theory relevant to her work. Virginia Woolf has been labelled as a feminist writer and the aim of this thesis is to discuss her position as such from a contemporary perspective and to ask what it means to call Woolf "feminist" and to draw inspiration from her feminism today. The focal point of the thesis is identifying different facets of the author's awareness and treatment of gender with focus on the representation of women as manifested in her literary works and to ask in what ways her writing challenges patriarchal values and where it stumbles in this regard.

Woolf's thoughts and approaches to topics regarding women were manifold and she foreshadows and touches upon notions which are relevant to different areas of current feminist thought and gender theory. It must be stressed that Woolf's position on gender, women and her feminism stemming from it cannot be seen as unified and reducible to a straightforward description. Woolf touches upon different concerns in different pieces of her writing in accordance with the organic development of her contemplation of these topics. At points, she presents views which seem contradictory and some of her stances regarding the determination of what kind of women are to be included in literature and feminist discourse can be seen as problematic especially from a present-day perspective.

The thesis aims not to put a definitive label on the way Woolf writes about gender but to sustain a nuanced discussion throughout. Therefore, in the analysis of the gender consciousness and representation in her works, it is necessary to refer to multiple recent trends addressing this problematic. Several branches of feminism and gender theory are consulted and implemented, namely French feminism, intersectional feminism and gender theory. These trends are relevant to Woolf's narrative style, the sociopolitical aspect of gender consciousness and representation in her works and her questioning of gender categories respectively.

Virginia Woolf was an essayist, novelist and a biographer deeply interested in the societal position of women as well as their representation in literature. She wrote and lectured about these topics and she participated in organisations concerned with bettering the positions of women in society. Her 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*

has become a famous feminist text which has strongly contributed to popularising feminist concerns and ideals. Some of the themes she presents in the essay are women's access to institutions and professions, women as writers and representation of women in literature. Another important feminist work of hers is *Three Guineas* published in 1938 which among other concerns relates patriarchy to fascism and imperialism and which has been more controversial than *A Room of One's Own*. It is majorly due to these two works that Woolf is regarded as a feminist writer. Therefore, in the study and discussion of Woolf's feminism and representation of women these works can hardly be omitted.

In Woolf's novels, female characters are never secondary and often form the author's central focus as is especially true of *Mrs Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*. This thesis draws attention to relevant aspects of *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*. The four novels published in the presented order between 1925 and 1931 can be said to be Woolf's most daring, experimental and consequently well-known novels. All of them provide a rich ground for analysis of gender issues and of progressive representation of women in a variety of manners.

The first chapter of the thesis discusses how Woolf's narrative style is subversive of the phallogocentric order in creating new spaces for and representations of female experience through the lens of *écriture féminine* as devised by the French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous. It is questioned whether Woolf's inventive prose style, for which Woolf has become acclaimed, can be understood as a plausible feminist practice. Woolf's idea of a "woman's sentence" is considered to see in what ways it relates to and can be understood as foreshadowing *écriture féminine*.

The second chapter considers Woolf's role and development as a feminist within historical context and accounts for the criticism of her feminist thought put forward by contemporary feminist writers. Woolf's fictional representation of women is confronted with the concept of intersectionality, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s, which is crucial for inclusive and therefore effective feminism. Woolf's defiance of heteronormativity is also examined as relevant to such inclusivity and as a challenge to patriarchal power.

The third chapter explores the fact that although writing about women was important to her, Woolf questions the predetermined nature of sex and the gender binary and its arbitrariness in *Orlando*. Thus, a movement from feminism and the often unproblematised category of "women" to a more in-depth challenging of the

constitution of gender issues is viewed in light of Judith Butler's gender theory. Again, Woolf alludes to notions which were articulated in terms of critical theory decades later.



# 1 Virginia Woolf and *écriture féminine*

Virginia Woolf's novels have stood out in literary history largely for their modernist narrative strategies and style. In relation to her style, this chapter will focus on the fact that in terms of content Woolf was throughout her career interested, both in her fiction and non-fiction, in highlighting the point of view of women as well as in the theme of partaking in a creative process within a patriarchal world. Woolf has been viewed and in a way canonised as one of the most important feminist writers in the West – although her being categorised as such is not unproblematic and shall be discussed further on in the thesis – primarily due to publications such as *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* in which she considers the position of women in society. It is of interest whether her fiction writing both in terms of its content and style can be seen as a form of feminist achievement as well.

It is to be analysed how New French Feminism and especially its *écriture féminine* or feminine writing as a subversive feminist project relates to Woolf's novel-writing as well as to her ideas about women's writing. Woolf herself was aware of the need for women to liberate themselves not only in life but also in their literary output. This is reflected in her consideration of the concept of a "woman's sentence" which shares features with and may be seen as a precursor of *écriture féminine*. *Écriture féminine* can be said to generally aim at offering an alternative manner of expression and being to the restrictive phallogocentric<sup>1</sup> and phallogocentric<sup>2</sup> orders which it opposes and aims to subvert.

Therefore, although many of the ideas and concepts related to *écriture féminine* originated years after Woolf's death, it seems relevant to Woolf's tendencies to employ alternative forms of expression in relaying human experience. This chapter considers the thought of one of the most prominent representatives of New French Feminism – Hélène Cixous. Her piece "The Laugh of the Medusa" published in 1976, remains a popular text until this day and is key for understanding the development

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<sup>1</sup> "Phallogocentrism" was coined by psychoanalyst Ernest Jones in 1927 in a disagreement with Sigmund Freud's position that female identity is defined by their lack of the phallus. Phallogocentrism refers to centering the the phallus and the male perspective.

<sup>2</sup> "Phallogocentrism" is a term coined by Jacques Derrida in "The Purveyor of the Truth" (1975). It is a portmanteau word combining the words "phallogocentrism" and "logocentrism," the latter meaning the centering of language in constructing the meaning of the world. Phallogocentrism refers to privileging the masculine in the construction of meaning and knowledge.

and implications of the concept of *écriture féminine*. Cixous's text helps elucidate the subversive nature of the spaces Woolf creates in her texts through unique language where women's minds are free to wander and where women are uninhibited in experiencing their selves and bodies. At the same time, Cixous helps conceptualise the way in which in her fiction Woolf exposes the restrictive nature of the male-dominated rational structures of language and of society in which life is bound.

The focus of the analysis are aspects of Woolf's novels *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* as they arguably constitute the height of her experimental literary endeavour in terms of narrative style. Furthermore, the point of view of female characters is stressed. The individual subchapters address the relation of Woolf's concept of the woman's sentence and Cixous's *écriture féminine*, the particular use of language in talking about the female body and pleasure in *Mrs Dalloway*, the significance of women's internal lives in the world of male-dominated rational thinking with focus on *To the Lighthouse*, the problematisation of the body as a site of liberation with focus on *The Waves* and the character Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. Lastly, further problematic aspects of Cixous's text are presented. The aim is to question whether and to what extent *écriture féminine* as presented by Cixous is appropriate and adaptable for the analysis of Woolf's feminist leanings in her works.

### **1.1 The Woman's Sentence and *écriture féminine***

Representatives of New French Feminism often derive their ideas from Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis. Freud especially is often critiqued by French feminists while some of Lacan's concepts and statements are adapted and remodelled by them. Although the French feminists differ, they are united by a theoretical framework. As Ann Rosalind Jones sums up in "Writing the Body",

In the realm of theory, the French share a deep critique of the modes through which the West has claimed to discern evidence – or reality – and a suspicion concerning efforts to change the position of women that fail to address the forces in the body, in the unconscious, in the basic structures of culture that are invisible to the empirical eye.

Briefly, the French feminists in general believe that Western thought has been based on systematic repression of women's experience.<sup>3</sup>

In her famous manifesto titled "The Laugh of the Medusa" Hélène Cixous speaks about what she means by *écriture féminine* and what should be its aims. It is a reaction to a masculine economy dominating thought and literature

where the repression of women has been perpetuated . . . where woman has never *her* turn to speak – this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures."<sup>4</sup>

Cixous stresses that women must break free from this masculine order, create their own new modes of expression and not fear to write. She writes that, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies . . . Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement."<sup>5</sup> Cixous does not provide a singular and clear definition of feminine writing or the processes it entails. In fact, she states that feminine writing cannot be defined.<sup>6</sup>

In her discourse she does not aim to be theoretical in any traditional sense as she is against a traditional and therefore male-centered construction of meaning. However, as Toril Moi observes in *Textual/Sexual Politics*, she does not completely manage to avoid theorising and analysis.<sup>7</sup> Despite the lack of a clear definition, it can, however, be assessed that the general notion of a need for a new mode of writing for women is reflected in Virginia Woolf's thought.

In thinking about the matter Woolf was inspired by the novelist Dorothy Richardson and in reviewing her book *The Tunnel* in 1919, she praises Richardson's innovative method of writing which to her represents a "genuine conviction of the discrepancy between what she has to say and the form provided by tradition for her to

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones, "Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture Féminine," *Feminist Studies* 7.2 (1981): 247.

<sup>4</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 879.

<sup>5</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 875.

<sup>6</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 883.

<sup>7</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985) 102.

say it in."<sup>8</sup> In her 1923 *The Nation and the Athenaeum* review of Richardson's *Revolving Lights* Woolf describes the feminine sentence as being

of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes. Other writers of the opposite sex have used sentences of this description and stretched them to the extreme. But there is a difference. Miss Richardson has fashioned her sentence consciously, in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson's consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

In her 1929 essay "Women and Fiction" she renounces the "sentence made by men"<sup>10</sup> and in *A Room of One's Own* published in the same year Woolf suggests what must happen in language in order for it to encompass a female experience. She writes that, "The resources of the English language would be put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence."<sup>11</sup> It is thus apparent that Woolf had been developing and pondering ideas about the importance of women's writing throughout her career and their manifestation in her fiction naturally calls for exploration.

A point of interest is whether Cixous's manifesto and Woolf's notion and practice of what she sees as feminine writing in fact overlap. Although their points of view seem similar, Woolf's thought is more intuitive rather than arising from critical theory. It must also be taken into consideration that Cixous's texts are not without flaws and relatedly without contradictions.

Cixous criticises the binary hierarchical system to which she sees "all concepts, codes and values" as subjected. She wonders whether this tendency to see the world in hierarchies is related to the couple man/woman and says that, "Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organizations subject to man,"<sup>12</sup> who claims victory in this opposition while the woman is associated with passivity. Moi comments that, "Against any binary scheme of thought, Cixous sets multiple,

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<sup>8</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Tunnel," *The Nation and the Athenaeum* (1919).

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Romance and the Heart," *The Nation and the Athenaeum* (1923).

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Women and Fiction," *Women and Writing*. Ed. Michèle Barrett (London: Women's Press Limited, 1979): 48.

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf. *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Books, 2004): 101.

<sup>12</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Newly Born Woman," *Hélène Cixous Reader*. Ed. Susan Sellers (London: Routledge, 1994): 38.

heterogenous difference."<sup>13</sup> This idea derives from Derrida's deconstructive process of *différance* through which meaning is "achieved through the 'free play of the signifier'" and "is never truly present, but is only constructed through the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers,"<sup>14</sup> which then dismantles the binary logic. It thus makes sense that Cixous refuses that *écriture féminine* could be coded or defined as that would make it comply with the binary which it wishes to subvert. It is to be outside of it as it will, according to Cixous, "always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination."<sup>15</sup>

It may seem that feminine writing exists within the binary of masculine/feminine as it is described as gendered, as pertaining to femininity. However, Cixous stresses that feminine writing is not feminine merely because it is produced by women. Rather, it is a new form of and movement in writing which breaks away from the phallogentric order and constant reference to it. It is not dependent on sex and can be produced by both men and women.

In "Castration or Decapitation?" Cixous states that,

Great care must be taken in working on feminine writing not to get trapped by names: to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be masculine writing, and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed by a man's name does not in itself exclude femininity.<sup>16</sup>

This position echoes Woolf's aforementioned claim in her review of Richardson that it have also been men who have penned a feminine sentence. In reality, both Woolf and Cixous, however, primarily focus on women employing the feminine sentence or *écriture féminine* respectively and their belief in their own statements thus remains suspect.

The difference between Cixous's and Woolf's approaches may be that Woolf focuses predominantly on exploring the "crannies" of women's consciousness while for Cixous, the practice of *écriture féminine* is majorly interlinked with the body and female desire or *jouissance*. In writing about New French Feminism, Jones explains

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<sup>13</sup> Moi 105.

<sup>14</sup> Moi 106.

<sup>15</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 883.

<sup>16</sup> Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation," *Signs* 7.1 (1981): 52.

that, "These French women agree that resistance does take place in the form of *jouissance*, that is, in the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father."<sup>17</sup> Cixous in particular suggests that there is a very direct link between the body and subversive writing as she writes that, "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse."<sup>18</sup> She also states that, "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her . . . Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time."<sup>19</sup> Writing offers a potential for the woman to reclaim her sexuality and the autonomy over her body, to gain her power by taking back what had been suppressed.

Interestingly, in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf posits the view that, "The book has somehow to be adapted to the body."<sup>20</sup> She suggests that physical conditions shall be a concern for women writers and that the form will be affected by the body and a woman's physical life.<sup>21</sup> This focus on the body by both Woolf and Cixous may be seen as a strategy to overcome the alienation of women from writing as previously marked to be a male-governed discipline. The writing is to be grounded in and enacted through the body. At the same time, writing is a venue to explore the body and take possession of it. The question which then arises is how that can translate into the writing as a product and not just into the experience of writing as a process.

Although Woolf acknowledges the importance of the body for the feminine sentence, in biographical discussions of her it is often pointed out that throughout her life she was anxious about and struggled with bodily matters and sexuality. Her experimental novels are well known for their deployment of the method of the so-called "stream of consciousness," for focusing on the processes of the mind rather than on physical desires. She does not straightforwardly call for a sexual liberation of women.

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<sup>17</sup> Jones 248.

<sup>18</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 886.

<sup>19</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 880.

<sup>20</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 91.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 91.

## 1.2 *Mrs Dalloway* – Body and Language

Nevertheless, there are moments when her female characters experience rapture of mind and relatedly of body. These moments are private and can be seen as liberatory as they seem to overcome any restriction. In *Mrs Dalloway* the central character Clarissa Dalloway is seen as a prudish and cold middle-age woman by the other characters, especially her former suitor Peter Walsh. However, as is true of Woolf's other female characters, Clarissa Dalloway is also presented as leading a private life, as experiencing a wealth of emotions and thought processes the depth of which Peter Walsh is unable to imagine.

Although Clarissa retains a sense of coldness and distance about her throughout the text, she does not allow being reduced merely to those attributes. She is aware of the combination of her illness and lack of warmth which obstructs her relationships with men in particular where the allusion is to physical relationships. It is said that she retains "a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet," and that, "through some contraction of this cold spirit, she had failed him."<sup>22</sup>

At one point, she then reveals that if she cannot resist yielding to the charm of someone, it is a woman, and the feeling is described in detail in the following excerpt,

It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened.<sup>23</sup>

The style of the passage stands out within the text as it mirrors the epiphanic nature of its content.

In her fiction Woolf employs free indirect style through which it is not disclosed straightforwardly but only implied that this is the train of thought of the character while the use of the third person suggests the presence of a narratorial voice. The technique provides a sense of freedom and spontaneous development in the sense

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<sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Vintage, 1992) 26.

<sup>23</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 26-27.

that there is a lack of framing of the thought by formal aspects and by the introduction of it by the narrator. The thought process is therefore not bound by these aspects and there is a notion of the text as a flow which is often referred to as a stream of consciousness. In his book *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach dissects the narrative strategies of Woolf and summarises the aspects discussed above by stating that, "The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae."<sup>24</sup> At points, the character and the narrator in fact seem to merge.

Auerbach seems baffled at this merging and the lack of authority and knowledge of the narrator whom he surprisingly conflates with the author. He writes that, "She does not seem to bear in mind that she is the author and hence ought to know how matters stand with her characters."<sup>25</sup> To dissolve or distill the narrator's voice seems to be a very conscious and purposeful artistic choice of Woolf's. The point is not to record what is true or what is objective fact so that the content is easily digested rather than to be interpreted.

Regardless of who the reader thinks to be narrating the passage, it is not straightforwardly revealed what happens or what the revelation entails. Rather, the text is a form of play. The narrator in Woolf's novels wonders, observes, merges with the point of view of another character, and sometimes teases the reader with questions about a subject they traditionally should know. There is joy in such play. The lack of systematicity and rationality in the style of the text is lauded by *écriture féminine* as subversive and shall be touched upon further on in relation to the content of Woolf's novels.

Similarly to character and narrator merging, a process of merging seems to occur in the case of a thought process and an experience. Contextually, it is clear that the passage in question is a recollection rather than an immediate experience. This is underscored by the lengthy first sentence which does not suggest immediacy but a level of deliberation. In the sentence the resemblance of the form to a flowing thought is retained by the wording smoothly progressing from expanding a notion or a sensation to finally capturing the whole of an experience. On the other hand, the latter part of the passage consists of court sections which suggest action. This part is

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<sup>24</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton:Princeton UP, 2003) 534.

<sup>25</sup> Auerbach 531.



dynamic as the units of the sentence are separated by semicolons rather than commas and so the previous flow is disrupted. If the first long sentence resembles a flow, the last two describe the rapture to which it was leading.

The laying out of a memory is a form of reliving and thus thought merges with physical sensation. The language here is directly related to the body. Clarissa must tap into the feeling and the sensations of the body to convey it vividly. She is said to describe a feeling which may be an emotion but there are strong suggestions of physicality in the words such as "blush," "quivered," "swollen," "pressure," "skin" and "gushed". Both in content and style the passage represents expansion and accumulation which results in illumination and rapture.

It seems to allude to sexual pleasure through its syntax as well as the choice of words which refer to the physical and can be associated with the sensations of the body. The culmination of pleasure is suggested by the "illumination" and the image of "a match burning in a crocus" can be seen as specifically referring to female sexuality with regard to the history of metaphorical use of floral images in this context. If Woolf adapts the form to reflect the content which is concerned with the bodily and the visceral, perhaps it can be said that she connects the body and unconventional use of language in compliance with Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*.

Furthermore, relevantly to the passage discussed above, in "Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous connects self-expression and search for knowledge with a woman's "passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity."<sup>26</sup> She sees masturbation as "prolonged or accompanied by a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful."<sup>27</sup>

At one point Clarissa thinks about the experience of illness and the everyday restrictions resulting from it as, going into her room to sleep, she feels "like a nun withdrawing." She thinks that, "There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. . . . The sheets were clean, thin, stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be. . . . Richard insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed."<sup>28</sup> It is not when alluding to the restriction of the body and by relation emptiness of life that the prose becomes inventive. It is when

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<sup>26</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 876.

<sup>27</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 876.

<sup>28</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 27.

Clarissa lets herself venture beyond the experience of everydayness to recall the unique revelation, a plane of existence different from the mundane, the excitement of the body and mind, of "a match burning in a crocus." The relationship between language and the body seems to work both ways – the body inspires the language choices and the style of the language seems to mirror and accommodate the processes and joys of the body. The poetic style of the prose lends a further sense of weight to the extraordinary and epiphanic nature of the experience.

However, in *Mrs Dalloway* in particular, similar style of intense and revelatory passages only appears in scattered bursts. In terms of style of the novel, Woolf is not yet at the height of her experiment. In terms of content, throughout the text Clarissa can be seen as guilty of pandering to the male-centered establishment. She is an inoffensive socialite who takes care to gain the approval of influential men in her role of a hostess. Most of the time her self-expression cannot be seen as subversive in any feminist sense.

Furthermore, the excerpt discussed above is prefaced by a reference to the male point of view as it is said that Clarissa "did undoubtedly then feel what men felt."<sup>29</sup> The male experience is still a framework of reference which the author is unable to avoid. This is so even though the difference between Clarissa's experience and experience understood as generally pertaining to men is conveyed through the image of the crocus. Furthermore, the narrative style also breaks away from any male-constituted conventions of realism and linear progress. The reference to male experience is a sign of being socialised within a phallogentric order to uphold the gender binary.

Similarly, "the most exquisite moment" of Clarissa's whole life, when "Sally stopped; picked a flower, kissed her on the lips,"<sup>30</sup> is interrupted by a man – Peter Walsh. Clarissa likens this interruption to "running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!"<sup>31</sup> The scene may be seen as symbolic of the nature of the phallogentric order in which nothing can exist without the reference to the masculine, the phallus, or without its interventions. It is the male presence and perspective which repeatedly proves itself to be central. Thus, in some scenes of *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf displays awareness of problems which would be

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<sup>29</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 27.

<sup>30</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 30.

<sup>31</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 30.

articulated decades later by feminists such as Cixous. This may prove to be true regarding Woolf's other novels to be explored.

### **1.3 *To the Lighthouse* – Women's Internal Lives in the World of Male-Dominated Rational Thought**

The experience of the body as related to inventive self-expression is explored by Woolf in her subsequent novel *To the Lighthouse* as shall be revealed further on in the chapter. In *To the Lighthouse*, the female character in the forefront is Mrs Ramsay who, similarly to Clarissa Dalloway, is preoccupied with fulfilling the role of a housewife. In the novel, Woolf employs free indirect style to a greater extent than in *Mrs Dalloway*. The degree of uncertainty in distinguishing the individual narrated interior monologues is heightened. The distinction between an authoritative narrative voice and the individual and subjective expression of a character's stream of thought narrated in the third person also seems to become more ambiguous. In the novel, the author explores both female and male consciousness. In contrast with the seamless nature of such a prose style, what strongly comes across in the novel's exploration of human consciousness is how differently the thinking of male and female characters is portrayed.

The most obvious opposition is that of the two major characters Mr and Mrs Ramsay which becomes established from the beginning of the novel as Mr Ramsay keeps countering Mrs Ramsay's encouragement of their son's hopes regarding a visit to the lighthouse. His response to her saying "Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow," is "But," said his father . . . 'it won't be fine.'"<sup>32</sup> This scene foreshadows the affirmative role of Mrs Ramsay in the novel. Largely, she is a positive presence to which other characters are drawn and around which they revolve. She uplifts others merely through the power of her presence. She is also a peacemaker which in the case of her complacent appeasing of Mr Ramsay's negative outbursts may be seen problematic from a feminist perspective.

However, her presence is depicted to ray out positivity and hope. After all, in a scene to be analysed, she is identified with the beams of the lighthouse. The way Mrs Ramsay is written in part recalls Cixous's statement that, "The feminine . . . affirms," as she refuses the idea of the female subject being constituted in terms of the

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<sup>32</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 7-8.

psychoanalytic notion of "lack" and thus validating "the religion of the father."<sup>33</sup> However, as has been suggested, Mrs Ramsay's role also becomes problematised.

From the following passage it is clear that Mr Ramsay is an upholder of the kind of strictly rational and structured thinking which Cixous associates with phallogentrism,

It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q.<sup>34</sup>

This mode of thought can be contrasted with that of Lily Briscoe, the young artist, about whom it is written that, "To follow her thought was like following a voice which speaks too quickly to be taken down by one's pencil, and the voice was her own voice saying without prompting undeniable, everlasting, contradictory things."<sup>35</sup> Lily's voice evades classification and is thus posed against the partitions and classes that Cixous finds restrictive and urges to be disposed of as when she says that, "There's work to be done against class, against categorization, against classification."<sup>36</sup> Lily's thought does not progress from one point to another within boundaries already strictly delineated as opposed to Mr Ramsay's thought which is proper and displays the urge to name, follow order and strictly classify.

Lily's thought is not neat but free to be spontaneous and contradictory which defies the tradition of reason represented by Mr Ramsay. Instead of progressing in a linear way, impressions in her mind

danced up and down . . . each separate but all marvellously controlled in an invisible elastic net . . . 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 there came, flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 884.

<sup>34</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 48.

<sup>35</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 33.

<sup>36</sup> Cixous, "Castration" 51.

<sup>37</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 33.

The "elastic net" recalls the "elastic fibre" in Woolf's description of a feminine sentence. Lily's thought exhibits pliancy, it is not completely restricted by the "male economy" of thought and expression. The linear steady progress is again substituted by excited movement and explosion of thought. The culmination mirrors that of Clarissa Dalloway's thought resulting in illumination although here it does not seem to have a sexual subtext.

However, Lily's thought is still connected to the physical world of sensation as the image of the starlings is tied into her thought within a single sentence. The shot mirrors the explosion and release of her thought. At first, it is not clear whether the description of the event is that of reality or whether Lily conjures the image as illustrating the activity of her mind. The latter possibility is dispelled as Mr Ramsay "boomed tragically" in reaction to the disturbance. The spontaneous activity hinders his progress from A to Z in the alphabet of knowledge and he "slammed the private door"<sup>38</sup> on the company, not allowing himself to process the event or think differently.

Cixous writes that,

In women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we've been permeated by it . . . retains the power of moving us – that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. Why this privileged relationship with the voice? Because no woman stockpiles as many defenses for countering the drives as does a man. You don't build walls around yourself, you don't forego pleasure as "wisely" as he. Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from "mother" . . . Here is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink.<sup>39</sup>

By "mother" with whom women have a stronger connection than men Cixous means the pre-Oedipal, pre-Symbolic mother. This excerpt seems relevant to *To the Lighthouse* particularly in the sense that Woolf portrays men's thinking as lacking imagination, freedom to meander and any connection to spontaneous wonder or sensation.

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<sup>38</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 37.

<sup>39</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 881.

Thus, the male voice is restricted as well as being restrictive. Woolf does not posit that all men are like Mr Ramsay. However, it is also clear that he is not a unique specimen which is underscored by the student Charles Tansley, his protégé who aims to follow Mr Ramsay's path in becoming one of the so-called great men. Through these two characters Woolf traces a tradition of knowledge and expression from which women have been excluded. Listening to these two men speaking, Mrs Ramsay thinks, "She could not follow the ugly academic jargon, that rattled itself off so glibly," referring to the language and its indirectness, its lack of sincerity.<sup>40</sup>

There is, however, a problem with Cixous's implication that it is the connection with the "mother" which urges women to "inscribe in language" their "woman's style."<sup>41</sup> If what at least in part constitutes their writing as *écriture féminine* is something inherent to women, the sincerity of her position that feminine writing is not tied to the sex of the writer becomes suspicious. In this sense Cixous's discourse perpetuates the binary opposition the relevance of which she denies elsewhere.

Cixous also says that, "In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes."<sup>42</sup> In response, Ann Rosalind Jones writes that, "I myself feel highly flattered by Cixous's praise for the nurturant perceptions of women, but when she speaks of a drive toward gestation, I begin to hear echoes of the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries."<sup>43</sup> It seems dangerous to define women as those who are innately predisposed to nourish as their function to nurture is what they have been forced to perform throughout the ages.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay as the mother may be seen as an example of that as she cares for eight children, a demanding husband, an array of guests and her role within the social context seems to be taken for granted. Her role drains her as it is said, the perspective being Mrs Ramsay's, that, "So boasting of her capacity to surround and protect, there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished and spent."<sup>44</sup> Lily is the one who realises that Mr Ramsay "wears Mrs Ramsay to death" and she calls him a "tyrant."<sup>45</sup> It appears that Mrs

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<sup>40</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 19.

<sup>41</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 882.

<sup>42</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 882.

<sup>43</sup> Jones 255.

<sup>44</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 53.

<sup>45</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 34.

Ramsay's affirmative presence, beauty and a sense of there being almost an angelic halo about her are countered by the dark side of her social role.

Relevantly to the discourse of Cixous, in portraying these characters and the dynamic between them, Woolf is again preoccupied with language on multiple levels. In a scene where the married couple sit quietly together, Mr Ramsay observes his wife who is reading Shakespeare's sonnets and it is revealed that, "He wondered what she was reading, and exaggerated her ignorance, her simplicity, for he liked to think that she was not clever, not book-learned at all."<sup>46</sup> Mrs Ramsay's stream of thought at that moment is not left unvoiced in the text, "All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her mind felt swept, felt clean. And then there it was, suddenly entire; she held it in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, here – the sonnet."<sup>47</sup> Mr Ramsay may doubt Mrs Ramsay's intelligence and her ability to comprehend great literature but in the act proves himself to be ignorant because he correlates intelligence with being learned.

Furthermore, Woolf endows Mrs Ramsay with sensibility and emotional intelligence in navigating her life and thinking about it and her surroundings which seems to be valued in the text. Mr Ramsay is throughout the novel shown to lack these to his detriment. Mrs Ramsay does not analyse the poem with learned tools but relates it to her life, sees that the sonnet can help her grasp it. Woolf's novels do not challenge the status quo only because they critically show the deprecation women have had to endure, often for failing to comply with codes produced by the structures from which they had been excluded. Her novels challenge it also in that large portions of the text are devoted to exploring the intelligence and creativity of her female characters' minds. She creates spaces where these females voices are unhindered, unsuppressed and free to wander.

However, it must be acknowledged that in Mrs Ramsay Woolf does not present an intensely subversive feminist element. The character is not able to trespass her social role of being dependent on and subservient to her imposing husband as well as the role of the nurturer even if she wished to surpass them. She excels at performing her social role and it seems significant that Woolf offers an in-depth exploration not only of the ways Mrs Ramsay feels the negative impact of fulfilling these roles but also the impact of the process of recuperation within her own creative

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<sup>46</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 163.

<sup>47</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 162.

and insightful mind. In a private moment Mrs Ramsay thinks, "All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others."<sup>48</sup> This thought process may be in discordance with Cixous's call for women's active and affirmative presence. Mrs Ramsay sits in the dark and expresses the sense of becoming it as well as finding freedom in being able to shed her identity all of which may be perceived as negative and as a sign of resignation.

And yet, her eloquent thought proves her existence and the potential for transformation. Her thought further unravels as follows, "This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability."<sup>49</sup> Woolf's texts are important from a feminist perspective because they create refuges for their female characters' mind. Woolf conjures up a textual space where the woman thinks freely and expresses herself without being hindered by societal constraints and trapped in the performance of gender roles.

The passages mapping the stretching out of a female character's mind can be seen as fissures or crevices in the text which evade the patriarchal context – in terms of social structures, and the phallogocentric context – in terms of language and the creation of meaning. Mrs Ramsay's evasion does not happen only in that she is alone but in that she can become a "wedge of darkness" or find herself identifying with the light of the lighthouse. Cixous describes a sort of evasion through language in women's self-expression,

Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers.<sup>50</sup>

Although Cixous's text does not succumb to easy analysis in its ambiguity and tendencies to be poetic, it may be said that the private moments created by Woolf where the female mind is free to wander constitute such passageways. For Cixous, the

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<sup>48</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 85.

<sup>49</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 86.

<sup>50</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 887.



acts of flying and making language fly signify creativity and breaking away from dominant concepts, modes of thinking and established narratives.

In the "world all of her own" which Cixous imagines, Mrs Ramsay creatively explores herself and feels "triumph over her life."<sup>51</sup> As it is said that, "She looked out to meet that stroke of the Lighthouse, the long steady stroke . . . which was her stroke,"<sup>52</sup> in the word "her" there is a notion that the world described indeed is all Mrs Ramsay's own. Furthermore, from the "wedge of darkness" Mrs Ramsay elevates her existence to become "light" as, "Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands until she became the thing she looked at – that light, for example."<sup>53</sup> The identification with the light is further explored as leading to self-knowledge and self-affirmation.

The following passage seems liberating in that it is bereft of the male gaze. Throughout the book it is often men who allude to Mrs Ramsay's beauty but here she is free to explore and claim her beauty unconventionally, in her own voice which for once is not policed,

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 inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose . . . there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover.<sup>54</sup>

The way of her thinking and the subject of it is not anything anybody else in the novel thinks or anything that could be pronounced or discussed with her husband. In his rationality Mr Ramsay might shun his wife's claim to becoming light or her identification with objects, however, the text privileges Mrs Ramsay as a unique creator over this great man whose greatness is portrayed as arbitrary.

When it is said that her feeling is "irrational," the term does not have derogatory undertones but rather suggests the freedom of imagination and wonder.

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<sup>51</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 86.

<sup>52</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 86.

<sup>53</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 86.

<sup>54</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 87.

The progress of her thought and language is her own rather than dictated by frameworks of linearity or logic. In her thought, she lets her body be touched by darkness and by light to become them. This becoming suggests a manner of control, of self-possession. Narrating her life and body is an act of creative autonomy and ownership. Language here is a mode of existence. She reinvents her existence through the narration of the self.

The strokes of the light with which she identifies suggest a physical stroke and caress, and as Makiko Minow-Pinkney says, can be associated with autoaffection or "one part of the object lovingly touching another."<sup>55</sup> In a similar sense, "the bride" rises "to meet her lover" in Mrs Ramsay's mind and also suggests one part of her touching another. Mrs Ramsay's experience resembles the previously discussed "crocus" scene in Mrs Dalloway. Mrs Ramsay observes the strokes of the light and has a feeling "as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight."<sup>56</sup> The physicality here is hinted at by the stroking fingers and the process said to take place in the "brain", a part of the anatomy, rather than in the abstract mind. The flood of delight recalls the illumination and the sensation of a "match burning in a crocus" experienced by Clarissa Dalloway.

Through the deep identification and merging of her mind and body with the world around her, Mrs Ramsay reaches an epiphany. Both Clarissa and Mrs Ramsay experience *jouissance* - mental and physical rapture. Mrs Ramsay's epiphanic experience nor the description of it obey logic. Her experience is still a source of knowledge which, along with the articulation of it, transcends the codes of the domestic life, the formulaic pleasantries exchanged with the guests and the constructed weight and importance of academic achievement by all of which Mrs Ramsay seems to be depleted to a point.

#### **1.4 *The Waves* and Lily Briscoe – Problematising the Body as a Site of Liberation**

Despite the body with its pleasure as a site of liberation being an attractive concept, it must be considered how this idea as presented by Cixous becomes problematic. It is

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<sup>55</sup> Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1987): 136.

<sup>56</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 88.

questionable whether focusing on the expression of women's sexuality and on the body can be liberating in itself if it has been previously appropriated and corrupted by patriarchy. In *Feminist Literary Studies* K. K. Ruthven remarks that, "It is true that the female 'speaking body' is commonly encountered in the literary tradition, but usually in representations which most feminists would regard as sexist."<sup>57</sup>

Regarding the body Cixous also writes that, "A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing."<sup>58</sup> Cixous's words sound ableist and even if it is assumed she does not mean them literally, they alienate a portion of women who have a problematic relationship to their body, whose body is incomplete or disabled and who may have involuntarily internalised certain values of patriarchy. Feminism seems useless if it does not offer viable venues of thought and action for all women and instead persecutes some of them, especially for something they have little control over.

The absence and inadequacy of the body is extensively touched upon in Woolf's *The Waves*. The whole text is threaded with one of the female character's struggle as she feels disconnected from the vessel of life that is her body and consequently struggles to exist and act in the world. Rhoda, as one of the other characters observes, "has no body as the others have."<sup>59</sup> Rhoda's internal struggle is mostly presented from her point of view as when she thinks that, "I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some hard door to call myself back to the body."<sup>60</sup> Her feeling of being disconnected from her own body is contrasted with her friend Jinny's enjoyment of and command over hers as Jinny thinks, "Look, when I move my head I ripple all down my narrow body . . . I leap like one of those flames that run between the cracks of the earth,"<sup>61</sup> as well as,

And I lie back; I give myself up to rapture . . . I meet the eyes of a sour woman, who suspects me of rapture. My body shuts in her face,

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<sup>57</sup> K. K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 101.

<sup>58</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 880.

<sup>59</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 15.

<sup>60</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 31.

<sup>61</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 30.

impertinently, like a parasol. I open my body, I shut my body at my will. Life is beginning. I now break into my hoard of life.<sup>62</sup>

As opposed to Rhoda, Jinny is able to use her body as an instrument and a source of pleasure. Rhoda cannot think nor otherwise create through the body in a positive way and according to the logic of Cixous, she must be disposed of. In the novel, Rhoda commits suicide. She may be disposed of in this sense but her experience should not be dismissed and in the novel it is dwelled on for most of the length of the text.

Woolf does not reveal the root of Rhoda's troubled nature but it can be assumed that she suffers from a mental disorder such as depression or depersonalisation. Woolf's portrayal of Rhoda is important because it is sympathetic rather than it being a stereotypical portrayal of an uncontrollable and unhinged madwoman in need of containment. Rhoda's mind is free to wander and narrate her own perception of life and her struggle as when she thinks that, "Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle. I dream; I dream."<sup>63</sup>

The language of Rhoda's thought is imaginative and poetic even as she ponders the terrors of life,

Pools lie on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns. The swallow dips her wing in dark pools. But here the door opens and people come; they come towards me. Throwing faint smiles to mask their cruelty, their indifference, they seize me. The swallow dips her wings; the moon rides through the blue seas alone . . . I am thrust back to stand burning in this clumsy, this ill-fitting body, . . . I who long for marble columns and pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips her wings.<sup>64</sup>

The lyrical images such as the swallow dipping her wing in dark pools or the moon riding through the blue seas evoke poetry. A similar effect is achieved by the repetition of some of these images as well as the fluctuating rhythm of the text created by the alternation of long and short clauses which creates a dramatic effect of the prose. Rhoda's voice which is both imaginative and full of terror is distinctive among those of the other characters in the novel. Through her inner voice she creates her own

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<sup>62</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 46-47.

<sup>63</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 33.

<sup>64</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 78.

world of columns and dark pools but ultimately she cannot reach this world as she cannot draw herself "across the enormous gulf into my body safely."<sup>65</sup>

Cixous suggests that women's liberation in any social structure is preceded by change in language but it becomes clear that this is not necessarily enough. Women's creativity alone and in itself cannot be highly subversive if they are using it to survive and to pull themselves out of exhaustion which may be caused by said social structures. In *The Waves* Rhoda kills herself to escape these structures. In *To the Lighthouse* Mrs Ramsay is ultimately bound to return from her liberatory revelations and take up her designated role within patriarchal structures again. In the end, Mrs Ramsay dies as well.

Cixous's call for killing the insufficient woman can be seen as echoing Woolf's urge to, as a writer, kill "the angel in the house," the unselfish Victorian woman "who sacrificed herself daily," as she writes in her essay titled "Professions for Women."<sup>66</sup> Perhaps Mrs Ramsay can be seen as this "angel in the house" but despite being killed off by the author, like Rhoda, within the text her creative voice is allowed to freely unravel. Her understanding and description of the world as well as her interaction with it is portrayed as having more substance, depth and truth to it than that of the "great men" precisely because it does not comply with their values.

The difference between Woolf's and Cixous's determination to "kill" is that through her prose Woolf advocates for spending time on exploring the potential and the voice of these women and does not merely aim to discard them. Furthermore, she presents them more as victims to be empathised with and witnesses to be learned from rather than primarily to be blamed for their insufficiency which is what Cixous leans toward. Woolf's expression through the medium of these female characters may not be as radically disruptive as Cixous wishes feminine writing to be but her writing is valuable for highlighting women's voices.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the character who disrupts the phallogocentric order in the most straightforward manner is Lily Briscoe, the artist, who struggles with men derailing her artistic efforts only because she is a woman. This occurs repeatedly throughout the novel as Lily recalls Charles Tansley's following words, "Women

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<sup>65</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 120.

<sup>66</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," *Women and Writing*. Ed. Michèle Barrett (London: Women's Press Limited, 1979): 59.

can't paint, women can't write."<sup>67</sup> These words are coupled with Lily's own self-doubt as she compares her work with that of an established painter and realises she cannot comply with his vision, "She could have done it differently . . . the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealised; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that."<sup>68</sup> Cixous also writes about the fear and shame women feel when they try to write and to create,

Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst – burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid.<sup>69</sup>

She urges women to write and to create and suggests that those activities performed by women are subversive because women have not been meant to express themselves or invent new venues of expression.

In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf makes her character move from self-doubt to self-actualisation and the height of her creative process is not private and hidden but takes place in the frequented garden of the respected Mr Ramsay. Pondering Tansley's degrading words regarding her work Lily asks, "What did that matter coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it?"<sup>70</sup> She realises that he tries to subdue her creativity because its potential threatens him. Underneath the pressure of the man's pronouncement of her inferiority she "anxiously" considers "what her plan of attack should be."<sup>71</sup>

Woolf ends the novel on a triumphant note. Lily not only stops caring about men's value judgment regarding her art, she also refuses to see the male-defined notion of greatness as relevant and instead pursues her own vision. In the final paragraph of the novel she is immersed in the creative process,

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. . .  
With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a

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<sup>67</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 67.

<sup>68</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 67.

<sup>69</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh" 876.

<sup>70</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 117.

<sup>71</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 256.

line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.<sup>72</sup>

Her line down the centre of the canvas represents disruption and authority over her creative process and perhaps over her life.

However, it must be noted that her progress towards this point is lined with anxiety and "extreme fatigue." Her creative revelation is not achieved through bodily pleasure so lauded by Cixous as the most appropriate source of creation for women. Rather, it is achieved in the face of a life-long mental struggle with established societal values and structures that has unpleasant physical manifestations. Cixous's idea of the body as a site of liberation and an unproblematic source of joyous creation again does not seem completely viable. As Jones writes, the French feminists tend to "make of the female body too unproblematically pleasurable and totalized an entity."<sup>73</sup> Not all women are fully able-bodied, relish in their sexuality or see in it a liberatory potential and yet they may raise challenges to phallogocentrism and phallogocentrism through their self-expression and praxis.

It may be appealing to see women reclaiming their sexuality together with their creativity as subversive. However, such narrative cannot be defined as the only appropriate and desired one not only because there is the danger of it being co-opted by and playing into masculine desires. A more liberatory approach would be granting women choice in navigating their struggles, including their relationship to their own body rather than coercing them into a ready-made narrative which seems regressive.

### **1.5 Other Problematic Aspects of Cixous's Approach**

One of the reasons why Cixous's discourse is not completely applicable to other texts as a theory is then that she universalises the notion of woman and does not account not only for various individual situations of women but also for the wider societal contexts they live in. Jones raises a relevant concern when she says that,

I have another political objection to the concept of *féminité* as a bundle of Everywoman's psychosexual characteristics: it flattens out the lived

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<sup>72</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 281.

<sup>73</sup> Jones 253.

differences among women. To the extent that each of us responds to a particular tribal, national, racial, or class situation.<sup>74</sup>

She adds that, "A monolithic vision of shared female sexuality, rather than defeating phallogentrism as doctrine and practice, is more likely to blind us to our varied and immediate needs and to the specific struggles we must coordinate in order to meet them."<sup>75</sup> In feminism and relatedly in feminist literary criticism and theory it seems detrimental when these contexts should be avoided as the pretense of a sociohistorical vacuum contributes to the erasure of women's realities. Such erasure hardly furthers women's cause.

In regards to Cixous, Toril Moi states that, "Cixous's vision of feminine/female writing as a way of re-establishing a spontaneous relationship to the physical *jouissance* of the female body may be read positively, as a utopian vision of female creativity in a truly non-oppressive and non-sexist society."<sup>76</sup> In that sense Cixous's discourse can be seen as a source of inspiration and hope, however, even in her text it is reflected that she is speaking from a certain position within a sexist and oppressive society. She is a woman of a certain race and class. Her position is necessarily Eurocentric which affects her texts. Thus, even her ahistorical and monolithic vision is unintentionally political.

Furthermore, as has been touched upon, it is problematic that she does not manage to evade the gender binary despite her aim to do so. The feminine always seems to slide back to opposing modes of thought and existence regarded as masculine or to the reference to them. It appears that it is difficult to avoid the gender binary when discussing women. It is not avoided in Cixous's ahistorical utopia nor, understandably, in the works of Woolf as she ultimately portrays women's lives within a patriarchal society who live this binary.

Both Woolf and Cixous had a similar urge to look for new possibilities of expression and self-actualisation for women which would grant them more freedom and independence in this regard. Cixous's text helps elucidate how Woolf's narrative style and language can be seen as feminist in dealing with certain themes pertaining to women. Woolf's concept of the "woman's sentence" bears common features with

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<sup>74</sup> Jones 257.

<sup>75</sup> Jones 257.

<sup>76</sup> Moi 121.



Cixous's *écriture féminine*. Cixous's concept helps in understanding the nature of Woolf's prose as challenging and subversive in regards to phallogocentrism and phallogocentrism.

Woolf presents alternative ways of creating meaning and ways of existence for women through imaginative use of language and style rather than privileging matter-of-fact, strictly rational and thus restrictive point of view in depicting the world and women's inner lives. Her texts are valuable because they privilege the point of view of the female characters who may typically be dismissed as irrational, irrelevant, not learned or mad and thus as subpar by proponents of patriarchal thinking. Woolf dwells on women's thinking to show it as importantly inventive. She presents it as play and as testimony.

In Cixous's terms, such textual strategies are necessary for the liberation of women as they resist and overcome the male-constructed tradition of reason and meaning which had been restrictive to women in imposing unfair hierarchies upon them. Cixous sees such modes of language and self-expression as closely related to the body. Aspects of such perspective can be observed in Woolf's prose, however, Woolf does not completely comply with Cixous's absolute stance on this which is in fact restrictive and problematic in itself.

In several ways Woolf's texts and the female characters in them may not be as radically subversive as Cixous urges women to be. However, it must be taken into consideration that Woolf shows women as existing within a certain social context and the negative impact it bears on them while Cixous chooses to ignore the specific social reality around her in her text. Furthermore, Cixous tends to universalise the notion of woman often from a biological perspective which bears the danger of slipping into essentialism.

Woolf's texts are valuable for showing the female characters dealing with their often suffocating realities creatively as Woolf creates refuges for female's characters minds. They shown to express themselves and experience their mind and body freely and to reinvent their existence in language. Woolf presents specific experience and concerns of individual women. These concerns would be elaborated on, theorised and strategised about years later by feminists and Woolf can be seen as their predecessor.

In a similar sense to Woolf not being compliant enough with the disruptive demands of Cixous and her *écriture féminine*, the discourse of feminine writing cannot be the only feminist lens through which Woolf's texts are to be viewed as it

displays its own problems of contradiction, generalisation, omission and at points a lack of allowance for nuance. However, it provides an interesting starting point in examining the use of potentially transformative language by women.

## **2 Virginia Woolf and Intersectional Feminism: Class, Race, Empire and Defiance of Heteronormativity**

Feminist leanings of Virginia Woolf both in her fiction and non-fiction have been highly debated over the past several decades in Woolf scholarship. It seems matter of fact to state that Virginia Woolf was a feminist and a feminist writer. She participated in a number of women's organisations throughout her lifetime and her literary work is not seldom concerned with elucidating and bettering women's position within patriarchal social structures. Woolf was thus interested in the sociopolitical realities of women's lives and although her exploration of women and language remains greatly relevant, this other aspect of her interest should not be neglected. Woolf has become a feminist icon mainly due to *A Room of One's Own*, her famous essay about women. To think of her as such should not, however, be done uncritically for with the evolution of feminist thought, the understanding of Woolf as a feminist must evolve as well.

The aim of this chapter is to examine how the label "feminist" has fit Woolf as a person and a writer in her time and how her feminist legacy informs contemporary feminism and can in turn be reevaluated by it. Consequently, it shall be considered how new trends in contemporary feminism influence interpretations of Woolf's novels and non-fiction. The dominant point of interest is to be reception and subsequent transformation of Woolf's literary works based on contemporary feminist trends with the main focus on intersectionality – examining the relation of gender to other categories such as race and class which have typically not been included in the discussion of Woolf's feminism.

Another concept to be considered is heteronormativity, the defiance of which is reflected in her work. Woolf elegantly and casually defies it by valuing and destigmatising those who fall outside of its norms of compulsory heterosexuality and gender binary which are constructs serving patriarchal power. Subverting heteronormativity which is a tool of patriarchal exclusion, erasure and silencing is an important part of Woolf's feminism. In relation to the subversion of it, the concepts of queerness, lesbianism and transgenderism shall be touched upon as pertaining to aspects of Woolf's work.

## 2.1 Virginia Woolf as a Feminist

Despite Woolf being strongly associated with feminism, her relation to and opinion on it and its aspects were ambiguous throughout her life. She participated in several feminist organisations such as the Women's Cooperative Guild which grouped workingmen's wives and she briefly participated in the women's suffrage movement, "addressing envelopes during the important year of 1910,"<sup>1</sup> as Naomi Black mentions in "A Note on the Feminist Politics of Virginia Woolf." She also famously gave a series of lectures at the two Cambridge women's colleges Newnham and Girton about the position of women which were to become *A Room of One's Own*.

In contrast with her involvement in suffrage stands the fact that, as Sowon S. Park points out in "Suffrage and Virginia Woolf,"

She continually expressed private reservations about both the individuals in the movement and the larger ethos behind it. Suffragists, with their 'queer accent' and 'drab shabby clothes,' are derided in her letters and diaries, and her comments resonate with popular anti-suffrage propaganda, the chief tactic of which was ridicule.<sup>2</sup>

This is one example of Woolf's ambivalence when it comes to feminist issues. Her remarks and attitude as quoted above come across as classist, deriding women of the lower classes in particular. In Woolf's private writings there can be found more instances of problematic views pertaining to class, ethnicity or race.

However, this does not make her feminist praxis and writing singularly dismissable. Her private writings were not necessarily meant to be seen and analysed by critics and she clearly was not as guarded in her expression as in her professional writings which, however, are not without a fault either and which shall be discussed. Although this does not absolve her problematic positions, Woolf as a person and a feminist was neither perfect nor static and her developments shall be accounted for with nuance. Further on in the chapter it shall be pointed out that Woolf was conscious of her privileged class position and how that reflects in her non-fiction and relates to class and representation in some of her most prominent novels.

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Black, "A Note on Feminist Politics of Virginia Woolf," *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 80.4 (1980): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Sowon S. Park, "Suffrage and Virginia Woolf: 'The Mass behind the Single Voice,'" *The Review of English Studies*, New Series 56.223 (2005): 120.

This particular ambivalence of Woolf reflects the general theme of her feminism which resists strict classification or unification of thought. On the difficulty to classify Woolf's feminism Pamela Caughie writes in "Feminist Woolf" that,

Taken as an oeuvre, Woolf's writings represent the multiple directions which feminist writings have taken historically. Rather than fitting Woolf into a ready-made definition of feminism, we might see her writings as having mindfully raised many of the issues that have defined, and will continue to define, feminism as new writers and historical circumstances emerge.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, Rachel Bowlby has touched upon the fact that the indeterminacy of Woolf's feminism allows for its appropriation by many strands of it. Jane Marcus writes how Bowlby

has also pointed up the ways in which such multivalency has made Woolf the exemplar for any number of different forms of feminism, although the fixing of Woolf to one position rather than another is wholly counter to her strategies and perspectives.<sup>4</sup>

Although her feminism remains without strict classification, Woolf is clearly being identified as a feminist despite the fact that she resisted the label in points of her life as in her 1938 essay *Three Guineas*.

In it she says the word "feminist" is "vicious", "corrupt" and obsolete as, "That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women'. Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning."<sup>5</sup> However, in *Three Guineas* this remark seems to be part of an effort to avoid alienating men and encourage them to take part in a joint effort of women and men in fighting for common causes together, as in the fight against fascism. Woolf writes that, "Our claim was no claim of women's rights only . . . It was larger and deeper; it was a claim for the rights of all – all men and women – to the respect in their persons of the great principles of Justice and Equality and Liberty."<sup>6</sup> Although

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela L. Caughie, "A Feminist Woolf," *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jessica Berman (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2016) 314.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Marcus. "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf," *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 172.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006) 76.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas* 121.

feminism may have acquired derogatory undertones in certain contexts and periods of time, it is clear that Woolf deemed causes pertaining to women's rights important, rallied for them and that she in her conviction was a feminist. The refusal of the word "feminist" is not a refusal of feminism itself. If anything, her statement foreshadows a vision of a future feminism which is broader and more inclusive.

In her feminist thought Woolf advocated for the right of women to education, to professional life – her particular point of interest being literary occupation, women's intellectual produce and bettering the conditions for all of those and more. She points out how these pursuits are often hindered by men and speaks directly of the negative effects of patriarchy. Along with these topics, in *A Room of One's Own* she also questions the way women have been represented by men asking the female reader the following, "Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?"<sup>7</sup> She goes on to say there has historically been a great disparity between the depiction of women by men and the actual reality of women's lives, "Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband."<sup>8</sup>

In Woolf's books, women can read and spell, they are often still bound to their husbands in a variety of ways but she also showcases their resistance to them and independence of thought. It is, however, of interest what women Woolf chooses to address and represent and what their relation is not only to men but to other women. Furthermore, it is of interest how the understanding of Woolf's literary output is transformed by recent trends and developments in feminism.

## **2.2 Woolf and Intersectional Feminism**

The concept of intersectionality in feminism was introduced by the feminist scholar and civil rights lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s in her article titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." In it, the concept of intersectionality is employed to denote how different kinds of discrimination and axes

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Books, 2004) 30.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 51.

of oppression such as those based on gender and race in fact overlap and intersect and should be accounted for within this context. The focus on such intersections can then be extended to other categories such as class, ethnicity, nationality or sexual orientation in the exploration of how they interact and affect each other.

As a black feminist, Crenshaw speaks of the "problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis."<sup>9</sup> She also specifically criticises "the centrality of white female experiences in the conceptualization of gender discrimination."<sup>10</sup> Intersectionality thus constitutes an important antidote to Western, white, middle-class feminism and its prevalent and false notion of universal womanhood. This notion is detrimental to the progress of feminist causes as it in fact does not account for differences between women which alter their experience of moving through the world as women.

Chandra Mohanty writes of this problem in her 1988 article "Under Western Eyes," in which she writes that constructing the category of women as homogenous means that, "An elision takes place between 'women' as a discursively constructed group and 'women' as material subjects of their own history."<sup>11</sup> Mohanty adds that such mindset limits

the possibility of coalitions among (usually White) Western feminists and working class and feminists of colour around the world. These limitations are evident in the construction of the (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently *all* women are expected to organize.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, as Nina Lykke points out in reference to Mohanty in her book *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*, "The idea of the global, feminist 'we' is thus . . . related to an equally unspecified 'they,' abstractly defined as women who appear to be 'more backwards' in terms of reaching out for the

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<sup>9</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989.1 (1989): 139.

<sup>10</sup> Crenshaw 144.

<sup>11</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary* 2.12/13 (1984): 334.

<sup>12</sup> Mohanty 334.

‘common’ feminist goals.”<sup>13</sup> This “they” often alludes to women of colour, Third World Women and working class women.

All of these concerns refer to a tradition of feminism Woolf necessarily was implicated in and influenced by as a white upper middle-class woman writing in the West during the first half of the twentieth century. If we talk about Woolf as a feminist, she should be contextualised in relation to this tradition. Nevertheless, even in her time, Woolf was developing consciousness regarding the issues of class and race as intersecting with women's issues. In “Women and Fiction” she expressed her expectation that thinking in these terms would also extend to women's fiction in which the characters “will not be observed wholly in relation to each other emotionally, but as they cohere and clash in groups and classes and races.”<sup>14</sup>

Woolf has addressed working women through her lectures and has worked with them. Class, race and Empire are topics Woolf touches upon in several ways in her non-fictional and fictional work. As she often speaks of women, the intersections of gender with these categories shall be considered while examining her feminist legacy. Interestingly, the notion of intersectionality has also been raised explicitly in reference to Woolf's work by contemporary feminist writers who through their remarks encourage transformation of thinking about and building on it.

It is predominantly Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* that has become a text widely understood as important in the study of the development of feminist thought, at least in the West. As Park mentions, Woolf's most famous essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* have been “cited as radical, original and ahead of their time.” However, it is necessary to acknowledge that Woolf strongly drew inspiration from her feminist predecessors and that many ideas that she expressed were being discussed at the time. In reference to *A Room of One's Own* Park writes that,

Her theories on women and fiction and on women's economic, and consequential psychological, dependence on men, the idea of a woman's language, and the invention of Judith Shakespeare had all

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<sup>13</sup> Nina Lykke, *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 53.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction,” *Forum* (1929): 182-183.



been expressed by Cicely Hamilton, May Sinclair, Elizabeth Robins, and Dorothy Richardson to name a few.<sup>15</sup>

Although these two texts written by Woolf may then not be wholly original in content, they are refreshing in form and approach to the topics in question which may have contributed to their popularity and by relation to the popularisation of the given feminist concerns of living under patriarchy and experiencing different kinds of gender-based oppression. *A Room of One's Own* especially has been attractive to wide readership in its employment of enticing fictional strategies despite the text being an essay. Its humour and conversational style add to its readability. Such accessibility of this feminist text remains of much value as it enables it to contribute to feminist conversations even today.

In the essay Woolf famously writes that, "For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure."<sup>16</sup> In her book *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf* Laura Marcus writes about this excerpt that,

She meant here, I think, to assert that fiction had long been female territory, but, more than that, that each generation of women writers influences each other, that style evolves historically and is determined by class and sex. She expected her literary 'daughters' to take up where she left off; they would not be so discreet about sex and they would not have 'the shoddy fetters of class on [their] feet.'<sup>17</sup>

This notion of thinking back through our mothers is true for Woolf in drawing on her feminist predecessors but it also applies in the sense that she herself is now often seen as a feminist mother.

*A Room of One's Own* has been referred to by several contemporary feminist writers. The theme often in question is the production of literature by women and the concept often elaborated on and revised is that which gave the essay its title. Woolf famously states that, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to

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<sup>15</sup> Park 122.

<sup>16</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 88.

<sup>17</sup> Laura Marcus, *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981) 5.

write fiction."<sup>18</sup> Woolf sees financial independence and a space to create in as key in the production of writing.

Critical of this idea, in "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde writes that,

Unacknowledged class differences rob women of each other's energy and creative insight. Recently a women's magazine collective made the decision for one issue to print only prose, saying poetry was a less "rigorous" or "serious" art form. Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper. . . . As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working-class, and Colored women. A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly to Lorde, in "Speaking in Tongues" Gloria Anzaldúa urges women to,

Forget the room of one's own – write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the john. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you're wealthy or have a patron – you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body.<sup>20</sup>

While views regarding poetry or prose being a more prestigious or accessible form than the other may vary depending on the historical period and cultural context, it becomes clear that despite Woolf's wishes, even decades after her death it has not been possible for women to shed the "fetters" of class. Although Woolf's famous saying that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write raises

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<sup>18</sup> Woolf, *A Room 4*.

<sup>19</sup> Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 855.

<sup>20</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers," *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Cherrié Moraga (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1981) 170.

a valid point as to why it has not been easy for women to write or be recognised for it, in her visions of sisterhood she does not often tend to imagine the possibilities of marginalised women apart from briefly expressing her hope that they may be more free sometime in the future.

Woolf realised that financial independence was unattainable for most women as she wrote that, "There must be at this moment some two thousand women capable of earning over five hundred a year in one way or another."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, she knew that her vision could not possibly be inclusive of all women, especially as a woman's freedom to write also demanded to be upheld by servants who were often women. For these, the creative freedom imagined by Woolf was not viable. In order to function when implemented in practice, Woolf's feminist vision needed to be exclusionary.

Both Lorde and Anzaldúa pinpoint the position of privilege from which Woolf wrote. Woolf herself knew she was not infallible in her positions and ideas and invited such revisions as when following the opening statement of her essay she anticipates and encourages the response to her text by her readership, saying that, "One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker."<sup>22</sup> Woolf was white, born into an upper-middle class family and was able to live a fairly sheltered life. In adulthood her financial status was not of excessive wealth but she could afford to keep servants, not to work, owned a publishing press and the allowance of five hundred pounds a year inherited from her aunt was not insignificant.

The various kinds of divide between Virginia Woolf and the two feminist writers living and writing in the second half of the twentieth century seem vast. Audre Lorde was a black woman, the daughter of immigrants born in New York and Gloria Anzaldúa was a Chicana woman growing up in rural Texas. Woolf may be a feminist icon but these women invite the rereading and rethinking of her work so that the understanding of Woolf does not remain static and the reading of her as a feminist writer complacent and uncritical.

Concerns similar to those of Anzaldúa and Lorde can be examined in fictionalised form in Sandra Cisneros's 1984 novel *The House on Mango Street* in which the heroine longs to become a writer while growing up without a stable home

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<sup>21</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 170.

<sup>22</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 4.

to write in. She dreams of a "house of her own"<sup>23</sup> but must first write regardless of her conditions in order to obtain such a space. In her book on Woolf's feminism Naomi Black points out other women writers who elaborated on Woolf's essay. She mentions Tillie Olsen's 1978 novel *Silences* in which she considers, "how childrearing and home maintenance have interfered with women's possibilities for artistic creativity."<sup>24</sup> This novel then inspired Ursula Le Guin's essay "The Fisherman's Daughter" on the same topic.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Woolf has inspired an ongoing conversation on what it means to be a woman writer.

Writers such as Lorde, Anzaldúa and others challenge what readers return to as a major feminist text without its reconsideration from a contemporary perspective. Woolf's fiction can be revisited in a similar way. The aim is not to chastise Woolf for her privilege and representation of women that may be blinded by it but to analyse in what ways she is exclusionary or problematic as well as to point out the points in which she was conscious of these issues. The aim is also to show that Woolf and her feminism, which affected the way she wrote her novels, cannot be separated from the themes of class, race and Empire if it is to be examined with honesty.

### **2.3 Gender and Class**

The view that Woolf can simply be reduced to a class-consciousness lacking highbrow snob has now been dispelled by many literary critics and readers of her work. There is evidence showing that Woolf was in fact highly aware of the gulf between her and the lower classes. In her piece "Memories of a Working Women's Guild" addressing her experience at the Guild she writes about her distance from the discussed issues and demands of the working women which were very urgent to them. Woolf writes about being untouched, "If every reform they demand was granted this very instant it would not touch one hair on my comfortable capitalistic head. Hence my interest is merely altruistic. . . . I sit here hypocritically clapping and stamping, an outcast from the flock."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 108.

<sup>24</sup> Naomi Black, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004) 191.

<sup>25</sup> Black, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* 191.

<sup>26</sup> Qtd in Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 88.

Contrasting with her awareness are several prejudiced statements aimed at the lower classes which Woolf expressed in her diaries and which may seem shocking to the contemporary reader. A number of these have been compiled by Hermione Lee in her essay titled "Virginia Woolf and Offence." Woolf recorded that, "The fact is the lower classes are detestable."<sup>27</sup> She also wrote that, "I have just travelled Kensington High Street – which almost made me vomit with hatred of the human race. Innumerable women of incredible mediocrity, drab as ditchwater, wash up and down like dirty papers against Barkers and Derry and Toms," and that, "For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born today among the working classes."<sup>28</sup> Her awareness and her attempts to participate in the struggle of the lower classes, especially regarding women's issues, combined with her contempt make for a contradiction typical of Woolf. Here her views indicate that she has trouble seeing the members of the lower classes as something other than a detestable mass. Although she rarely expresses her inclination to contempt straightforwardly in writing about the lower classes in her essays or novels, her prejudice surfaces in them in more subtle ways.

To further the sense of contradiction, at other points she expresses her longing for knowledge about lower-class women's lives as in *A Room of One's Own* in which she states that, "All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded."<sup>29</sup> She feels the pressure of "the accumulation of unrecorded life, whether from the women at the street corners with their arms akimbo . . . or from the violet-sellers and match-sellers and old crones stationed under doorways; or from drifting girls."<sup>30</sup> Woolf felt it important that the lives of these women, their relation to the world and the struggle within it should not be forgotten. They should be recorded and validated in a similar way that the lives of the so-called great men such as Napoleon are being recorded over and over again. She also felt it to be necessary because it is women who often encourage and prop men up.

In Woolf's novels, however, the female characters who take the centre stage are always middle-class or upper-middle class women. It is characters such as

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<sup>27</sup> Qtd in Hermione Lee, "Virginia Woolf and Offence," *The Art of Literary Biography*. Ed. John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 162.

<sup>28</sup> Qtd in Lee, "Virginia Woolf and Offence" 163.

<sup>29</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 104.

<sup>30</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 104.

Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay who live a life of comfort and who do not have to work, whose inner lives are what Woolf predominantly focuses on in terms of representation of women. This is not to say, however, that she portrays these female characters or their social circle entirely uncritically and without reflection on the privileges of their class.

Mentioning how in *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf stirs her focus to the so-called governing-class and its critique Zwerdling writes that, "Woolf gives us a picture of a class impervious to change in a society that desperately needs or demands it, a class that worships tradition and settled order but cannot accommodate the new and disturbing."<sup>31</sup> In the novel, the central character is a woman living a comfortable life of leisure. She can afford to be ignorant about world affairs and the true horrors of war and is only shocked into semblance of awareness regarding the suffering of others when she hears first-hand about the suicide of the war veteran Septimus Warren Smith in geographical proximity to her.

On the other hand, *Mrs Dalloway* shows the entrapment of an upper-middle class housewife who lacks any meaningful occupation and whose life revolves around investing herself in social obligations such as the party she organises. Her role of a hostess includes always keeping up a facade of pleasantry in social interactions which often come across as superficial. Although living a life of material privilege, her gender and the related lack of education binds her to be subservient to the dominant figure of her husband. Zwerdling writes that, "Woolf's picture of Clarissa Dalloway's world is sharply critical, but . . . it cannot be called an indictment, because it deliberately looks at its object from the inside."<sup>32</sup>

However, Clarissa is also seen and criticised from an outer perspective, that of her old friend Peter Walsh who is a slight outcast among the guests at Clarissa's party and he views them and the hostess with a critical eye, "'How delightful to see you!' said Clarissa. . . . She was at her worst – effusive, insincere."<sup>33</sup> Peter laughs when the guests pretend not to notice the arrival of the Prime Minister while feeling his presence to the marrow of their bones and cherishing being part of the occasion, "Lord, lord, the snobbery of the English! thought Peter Walsh, standing in the corner.

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<sup>31</sup> Zwerdling 123.

<sup>32</sup> Zwerdling 120.

<sup>33</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 148.

How they loved dressing up in gold lace and doing homage!"<sup>34</sup> He exposes the pretense and hypocrisy in the social interactions at the party.

A pattern of being outwardly pleasant and offering praise to someone while thinking negative thoughts about them both on the part of Clarissa and the guests keeps surfacing throughout the party scene. During an exchange of pleasantries a guest Clarissa speaks to really thinks she is a "prig."<sup>35</sup> The only sincere people at the party are Peter and Sally, Clarissa's old friends who are paradoxically not her priority in attending to as they are placed lower within the social hierarchy than the other guests. The role of a hostess is presented as empty unenjoyable pandering to the establishment. Clarissa admits to herself that, "It was too much of an effort. She was not enjoying it."<sup>36</sup> Yet, Clarissa cannot be presented as a mere victim to her social role with no agency within it. As Zwerdling points out, it is significant that Woolf stresses the inner life of Clarissa which encourages the reader to empathise with her despite her downfalls. It becomes relevant that Woolf is not neutral as to which characters she chooses to observe from the inside as shall be seen further on.

Woolf does portray lower-class women and the poor, however, these characters are marginal and their portrayal is in danger of sliding into the realm of caricature at times. Septimus Smith, the war veteran, as well as Doris Kilman, the teacher of Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth, are the type of lower-class characters who would never get invited to the high-society party that Clarissa organises as her party is "strictly class-demarcated."<sup>37</sup> Although it can be said that the governing class refuses to be inclusive of figures such as Septimus and Doris Kilman, in her writing Woolf is more sympathetic with the former character rather than the latter. Clarissa Dalloway who at points identifies with Septimus, resents Miss Kilman and the feeling is mutual.

Miss Kilman records about Clarissa that, "She had been merely condescending. She came from the most worthless of all classes – the rich, with a smattering of culture."<sup>38</sup> Further she thinks, "Fool! Simpleton! You who have known neither sorrow nor pleasure; who have trifled your life away! And there rose in her an

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<sup>34</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 148.

<sup>35</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 150.

<sup>36</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 148.

<sup>37</sup> Zwerdling 122.

<sup>38</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Vintage, 1992) 108.

overmastering desire to overcome her; to unmask her."<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Clarissa's thoughts about Miss Kilman go as follows,

Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired; she was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were; how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be.<sup>40</sup>

Kilman is seen as "Heavy, ugly, commonplace, without kindness or grace, she know the meaning of life!"<sup>41</sup> Neither Miss Kilman nor Clarissa can overcome the class barrier to even hold a conversation. Clarissa is condescending to Kilman and openly laughs at her at the end of their encounter. In the confrontation Kilman has little standing as her livelihood is dependent on the Dalloway family. Clarissa's resentment is based on Kilman's unsightly appearance, her bluntness regarding the conditions she comes from and her education superior to Clarissa's.

Kilman has less of a problem with Clarissa's husband thinking that, "Mr. Dalloway, to do him justice, had been kind. But Mrs. Dalloway had not. She had been merely condescending."<sup>42</sup> Clarissa feels that, "This woman had taken her daughter from her,"<sup>43</sup> and has an inkling of a romance going on between Kilman and her daughter. Richard Dalloway attributes this to a "phase." However, Clarissa is disturbed not because her daughter Elizabeth might fancy a woman which would go against the patriarchal heteronormative code, as she herself explored and embraced her feelings for a girl called Sally Seton in her youth, but because of the woman belonging to a lower class. That is the basis on which she derides her. Furthermore, despite her ugliness, poverty and lack of genteel manners, Kilman has intellectual and emotional capital which Clarissa lacks and this bothers her.

Kilman is shown as self-aware and politically conscious. It is said that, "Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians," and that she had lost her previous job due to the refusal to "pretend that Germans were all villains."<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Clarissa is at points presented as ignorant as in the following passage which refers to the Armenian genocide,

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<sup>39</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 110.

<sup>40</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 9.

<sup>41</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 110.

<sup>42</sup> Woolf, *Mr Dalloway* 107.

<sup>43</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 110.

<sup>44</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 119.



And people would say, "Clarissa Dalloway is spoilt." She cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again) – no, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses (didn't that help the Armenians?).<sup>45</sup>

Clarissa's day-to-day reality is so distanced from any material plight that she cannot relate or feel compassion with those who are suffering.

The passage quoted above corresponds with one that Woolf recorded in her diary about herself. In "Reading Woolf in India," Supriya Chaudhuri records that, "On May 12, 1919, responding to the Armenian genocide, she writes, perhaps ironically: 'I laughed to myself over the quantities of Armenians. How can one mind whether they number 4,000 or 4,000,000? The feat is beyond me.'"<sup>46</sup> Even if ironic or written in jest, the statement comes across as devoid of any empathy and the comparison of the passages as well as Woolf's aforementioned remarks regarding class implies that the novelist identified more with Clarissa Dalloway rather than with Doris Kilman. Clarissa is so sheltered and cushioned by her privileged lifestyle that she can comfortably care primarily about material and superficial things such as parties and roses and although Woolf explores deeper concerns than that when it comes to her inner life and sensations, those seem very individualistic.

In a sense Doris Kilman comes across as a positive figure, however, Woolf makes her unlikeable and difficult to be empathised with not only through the focus being on the point of view of Clarissa but also in the passages when the point of view is Kilman's. Kilman is described as "bitter and burning" which is why she turns to religion, "So now, whenever the hot and painful feelings boiled within her, this hatred of Mrs. Dalloway, this grudge against the world, she thought of God."<sup>47</sup> Kilman is shown to be a pathetic figure full of badly concealed self-pity. When she talks to Elizabeth she says, "'People don't ask me to parties . . . Why should they ask me?" she said. 'I'm plain, I'm unhappy.'"<sup>48</sup> It becomes clear that she adores Elizabeth but the sentiment is unrequited. Elizabeth is mostly preoccupied with herself and of Kilman

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<sup>45</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 106.

<sup>46</sup> Supriya Chaudhuri, "Reading Woolf in India," *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jessica Berman (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2016) 455.

<sup>47</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 136.

<sup>48</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 138.

thinks that, "It was always talking about her own sufferings that made Miss Kilman so difficult."<sup>49</sup> When Elizabeth gets up to leave the tea place where they sit together it is said that, "Miss Kilman sat at the marble table among the éclairs, stricken once, twice, thrice by shocks of suffering."<sup>50</sup> Woolf does not allow for Kilman to experience fulfillment in any area of her life or even superficial joys in the same way other characters do where that experience is transferred to the reader through a wandering stream of consciousness. Miss Kilman is of a lower class and is defined by discontent the injustice of which makes her unpleasant and unlikeable. In Woolf's novels there is the implication that working-class women do not have rich inner lives or that they are not of value or interest despite Woolf's concern regarding lack of representation of all kinds of women in *A Room of One's Own*.

A very minor character which reappears in several of Woolf's novels is that of the singing beggar woman. In *Mrs Dalloway* the woman is heard singing about her lover,

Through all ages . . . through the age of tusk and mammoth . . . the battered woman . . . with her right hand exposed, her left clutching at her side, stood singing of love – love which has lasted a million years, she sang, love which prevails . . . and when at last she laid her hoary and immensely aged head on the earth . . . she implored the Gods to lay by her side a bunch of purple-heather, there on her high burial place . . . for then the pageant of the universe would be over.<sup>51</sup>

A character of a similar nature also appears in *Jacob's Room* or *The Years*. The beggar woman is presented as a mythical creature who remembers a "primeval May," her voice is that of "an ancient spring sprouting from the earth." Such mythicisation recalls a wider tendency in modernist literature.

The use of the mythical method in James Joyce's *Ulysses* is described by T.S. Eliot in his essay "Ulysses, Order and Myth" in 1923. The myth not only provides a form to contain the plot but it also provides a "way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."<sup>52</sup> The mythical method is often used in the balancing

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<sup>49</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 139.

<sup>50</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 138.

<sup>51</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 71.

<sup>52</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *Dial* 75.5 (1923) 480.

and contemplation of present-day civilisational concerns the reality of which may seem futile or dire. He also points out that myth was used by W.B. Yeats and Eliot employs it himself in *The Waste Land* in which he presents the figure of the Fisher King whose potency is bound to the fertility and prosperity of the land.

Similarly, in *Mrs Dalloway* the beggar woman is presented as bound to the earth and its fertility as her voice is said to be "fertilising" and "soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages."<sup>53</sup> In a sense, she can be seen as embodying a Mother Earth figure. However, such representation becomes twisted and made derogatory by the author as the beggar is subsequently portrayed as slightly repulsive, a "rusty pump," her song coming from "so rude a mouth, a mere hole in the earth," leaving a "damp stain."<sup>54</sup> Excessive but without character or thoughts of her own, Woolf's beggar woman is a grotesque caricature. The mythicisation of the beggar is really a tool of hyperbolic mockery as the portrayal slides into presenting a pathetic creature worth recoil. Woolf may be pointing out the eternal social problem of the beggar or vagrant but the representation is not empathetic. Rather, she provides archetypal reduction and unsympathetic dehumanisation.

Significantly, the woman is a character observed from the outside, one that the other characters are unfortunate to pass on their journey through the city. In "The Blight of Class: Woolf and the 'Lower Orders'" David Bradshaw states that when the focus pans to lower-class women in Woolf's fiction, "They must be physically negotiated by their superiors as well as the reader, as if Woolf wishes to stress that the problems of the poor and disadvantaged cannot be circumvented, glossed over or ignored."<sup>55</sup> In *Mrs Dalloway* this is the case of Richard who must pass by her and briefly thinks about her case,

But what could be done for female vagrants like that poor creature . . . he did not know. . . . there was time for a spark between them – she laughed at the sight of him, he smiled good-humouredly, considering the problem of the female vagrant; not that they would ever speak.<sup>56</sup>

The beggar is too low on the social ladder for him to extend his hand to her unlike Miss Kilman who has education and value for him as his daughter's teacher.

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<sup>53</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 73.

<sup>54</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 73.

<sup>55</sup> David Bradshaw. "The Blight of Class: Woolf and the 'Lower Orders,'" *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* 85 (2014): 111.

<sup>56</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 74.

It is unthinkable for him to speak to that woman. Richard will not solve the problem of the vagrant precisely because he will never speak to her. In his book Zwerdling states that it is as though the lower-class people "spoke a foreign tongue that the middle-class observer barely understands. There are a number of passages in Woolf's fiction that render the language of the poor as nonsense."<sup>57</sup> This is also the case of the beggar woman in question whose timeless song is transcribed as, "ee um fah um so / foo swee too eem oo."<sup>58</sup> Not only cannot Richard sink to talk to the beggar but there can be no testimony of the poorest of the poor because in the perception of the upper classes they do not speak the common language. The barrier between the wealthy and the poor is portrayed as insurmountable. Richard is able to perform individual acts of charity which cost him little and which benefit him as in the case of Kilman. However, he cannot think of a way to help the vagrant's situation despite being a Member of the Parliament and having a platform for raising such concerns and for taking action. However, he thinks of her no more as soon as he passes by her.

The beggar woman is a prop in the city, one that has always been there and one that "would still be there in ten million years." She is static and nothing can be understood of the nonsense that comes out of her mouth. Nothing can be done about her condition. Although Woolf cannot mask her contempt for the poor, she also uses the beggar woman to shed a critical eye on other characters in her novel. The situation of the poor is clearly of minor interest to Richard. At the moment of the encounter he is on his way home, carrying a bouquet of roses and planning to make a declaration of love to his wife Clarissa. In the end he finds he is emotionally stunted and unable to express his feelings which is in great contrast with the vagrant whose knowledge and unbridled testimony of love resonates throughout the ages. Despite her grotesqueness, the woman is in touch with the earth, the Gods and her emotions more than Richard who is detached and cannot even bear looking into her eyes, smiling awkwardly. Although she is poor and pitied by the other characters, in a sense the vagrant comes across as a more wholesome person with a more poignant message to tell, albeit unintelligibly, as opposed to the supposedly articulate upper-middle-class man.

Another character who briefly expresses concern for the vagrant is Rezia, a hat-maker and Septimus's wife, "'Poor old woman,' said Rezia Warren Smith, waiting

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<sup>57</sup> Zwerdling 97.

<sup>58</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 90.

to cross. Oh poor old wretch! Suppose it was a wet night? . . . And where did she sleep at night?"<sup>59</sup> However, Rezia adds, "Suppose one's father, or somebody who had known one in better days had happened to pass, and saw one standing there in the gutter?"<sup>60</sup> Her concern is also with social status and related shame as she imagines herself in the woman's place. After all, her self-employment is not stable, her husband is unable to work and their finances are spent on his recovery. Nevertheless, this scene stands out as a hint of solidarity and compassion directed from one woman to another across social strata.

One other such instance seems to occur in *To the Lighthouse* in which Mrs Ramsay regularly visits the poor as was common practice for middle-class women in the nineteenth century. Such benevolence, however, has been understood as a form of minimising guilt and "by the twentieth century . . . had begun to appear both ineffectual and bogus."<sup>61</sup> Mrs Ramsay records information about the poor, imagining becoming "what with her untrained mind she greatly admired, an investigator, elucidating the social problem."<sup>62</sup> Not only is the effort ineffective and in the sense of appeasing one's own guilt self-serving but Woolf also uses the moment to point out the lack of education and social capital which prevents women such as Mrs Ramsay to achieve a similar status that "great men" do. The character's primary desire is presented to be for the individual achievement rather than for the benefit of the poor.

Perhaps the most notorious working-class character written by Woolf is Mrs McNab in *To the Lighthouse*, the charwoman who appears in the middle section of the novel titled "Time Passes." She cleans and restores the Ramsay family holiday house from dust, dirt and decay after a long interlude between their visits. The task is gruelling for an old woman. The passage describing her toil stretches on to convey the burden placed upon her. The burden is of decay and disintegration not only of the house but also of civilisation as the passage takes place in the time of the First World War. While the world is busy mourning, the working-class woman has to grapple with the death and decay. She sacrifices herself to make other people's lives livable. Through the time of death which is the war as well as the deaths of several members

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<sup>59</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 72.

<sup>60</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 72.

<sup>61</sup> Zwerdling 99-100.

<sup>62</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 15.

of the Ramsay family, in her old age Mrs McNab slowly but surely moves through the drudgery of the work and through the related pain.

Jean Mills endorses K. Simpson's argument that the novel's section "creates a narrative space in which the labour of working women, their voices, and their views are represented."<sup>63</sup> Woolf seems to stress the work that is difficult and the resilient worker who and whose effort is often invisible. Mrs McNab's and her friend's Mrs Bast's effort is presented as nearly heroic as they "rescued from the pool of Time that was fast closing over them now a basin, now a cupboard . . . Some rusty laborious birth seemed to be taking place . . . Oh, they said the work!"<sup>64</sup> In the passage Woolf dwells on describing a task that is rarely described in fiction as it may seem banal and uninteresting. She presents cleaning and tidying as a taxing, heroic task of rescue and grappling with forces of time and death, of restoring life and making life possible.

The question is whether Woolf truly aims to elevate the value of these women workers who are often taken for granted and undervalued or whether she mocks them. In the same way that it is hard to believe that Woolf sees the female vagrant as an earthly goddess-like being, it is dubious that she sees the cleaning woman and her banal work as heroic, especially given Woolf's history of negative evaluation of the lower classes. The exalted description of Mrs McNab's drudgery which is raised to a heroic feat is a tool similar to the mythicisation of the female vagrant. Rather than alluding to true heroism, the descriptive streak is mock-heroic. Again, the working-class woman in Woolf's fiction is a grotesque caricature.

The notion of the representation of Mrs McNab not being thoroughly sympathetic is supported by the fact that, contrary to Simpson's statement, Woolf does not truly present a picture of Mrs McNab's inner life and thoughts as diverse or valid. On the contrary, she is presented as incapable of coherent thought and a sense of intelligibility of the lower-class woman is retained as it is in the case of the vagrant. Like some other working-class characters in Woolf's fiction, Mrs McNab sings an outdated song instead of speaking. It is said that "she was witless, she knew it" and her singing is "robbed of meaning, the voice of witlessness."<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, she is presented as heavy and clumsy as she "lurched (for she rolled like a ship at sea) and

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<sup>63</sup> Jean Mills, "Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Class," *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jessica Berman (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2016) 225.

<sup>64</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 190.

<sup>65</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 178.

leered."<sup>66</sup> The section shows that Woolf tends to perpetuate the stereotype of the witless, formless, inarticulate lower classes. Like the vagrant, Mrs McNab is a slightly alien presence to be observed as "she looked like a tropical fish oaring it way through sun-laced waters."<sup>67</sup> The worker is source of wonder. She is something to be watched passively from distance, a curious spectacle.

Woolf herself alluded to the impossibility of fully relating to the lower-class experience being the obstacle in accurately representing it when she writes that, "The imagination is largely the child of the flesh. One could not be Mrs. Giles of Durham because one's body had never stood at the wash-tub; one's hands had never wrung and scrubbed and chopped up whatever the meat may be that makes a miner's supper."<sup>68</sup> It is true that she could not have lived their experience, however, she grew up surrounded by servants, later in life employed them herself and it can thus be assumed that she had some level of insight into their lives. It is questionable whether Woolf's failure to provide in-depth, non-reductive and compassionate portraits of people of the lower classes, who in her fiction are predominantly women, was a consequence of inability, refusal or both. Although she values the vision of all kinds of women being represented and their lives validated, she only implements it half-heartedly.

## 2.4 Gender, Race and Empire

Woolf's relation to the topics of race and Empire is complex. Her family history is steeped in the British imperial project and administration which she grew critical of. Her critical stance on Empire is mainly articulated in *Three Guineas*. Her views may have been influenced by her husband Leonard Woolf, by the time of their marriage an ex-colonial administrator who grew to highly criticise and condemn the imperial project. Helen Carr notes that the Woolfs' Hogarth Press "published a number of anti-imperialist books, including, in 1933, C. L. R. James's *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*, and the Woolfs had significant contacts, as Snaith points out, with colonial writers and intellectuals."<sup>69</sup> Woolf's representation of nonwhite races and aspects of Empire in her own literary output often seems casual and neutral. She may

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<sup>66</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 178.

<sup>67</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 180.

<sup>68</sup> Qtd in Zwerdling 117.

<sup>69</sup> Helen Carr, "Empire and Race," *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011) 12.

be seen as pointing to the decline of the imperial project with irony and no real nostalgia such as in *The Waves*. However, her fiction especially bears signs of internalisation of prejudice and condescension in regards to the categories of nonwhite people and colonised peoples.

As with the topic of class prejudice, Woolf's private writings bear instances of racism as when in an entry in 1935 she discloses that,

Went to Peace Conference, by way of a joke, yesterday, & saw several baboon faced intellectuals; also some yearning, sad, green dressed negroes & negresses, looking like chimpanzees brought out of their coconut groves to try to make sense of our pale white platitudes.<sup>70</sup>

Such passages in her private writings make for a difficult read but must be acknowledged to create an accurate view of her stances even if the main concern of the discussion shall be her novels and essays. Nevertheless, she was also conscious of and exerted effort to battle, dismantle and question colonial and by implication racist mentality and her point of view is not reducible to a diary entry.

Woolf perceived imperialism as stemming from patriarchy and thus saw it in part as a gendered issue. In *Three Guineas* Woolf quotes Lady Lovelace who mentions, "Our splendid empire . . . the price of which . . . is mainly paid by women."<sup>71</sup> Lovelace's comment refers to English women having to perform for and uphold the perpetrators of the Empire but as Black writes, Woolf uses it for "wider implications, a condemnation of empire as the paraphernalia of patriarchy."<sup>72</sup> It is to be analysed how her fictional representation of the topic reflects her concern for the colonised people, both women or men. Her critique of Empire and representation of nonwhite people in general can be considered as part of her feminist viewpoint.

When it comes to discussion of race, a passage in *A Room of One's own* has become a constant focus of critique. The narrator tries to distance herself from the civilising mission of the Empire stemming from patriarchal values by saying that, "It is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her."<sup>73</sup> Woolf suggests that women are free of the desire for greatness and fame which includes the imperial

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<sup>70</sup> Qtd in John Mepham, *Virginia Woolf: A Literary Life* (New York: Springer, 2016) 163.

<sup>71</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas* 37.

<sup>72</sup> Black, *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* 177.

<sup>73</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 59.



conquest. The question is whether her position is purely that of disagreement with the Empire or whether part of such admission is the lack of access to being part of the civilising power.

Furthermore, a colonial mentality is manifested in the simple sentence in that, as Jane Marcus writes about the image of the black woman in *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Writing Race*, "The word fine suggests that she is not wholly free, for it is a word used to describe an object not a fellow subject, as if the Negress were an exotic work of art."<sup>74</sup> Such mentality must be also read within the context of white English women's relation to the Other. As Marcus writes, "Middle-class women in England traded their own freedom for a power over servants (or natives in the colonies), which replicated the master/slave relationship of husbands and wives."<sup>75</sup> The colonial mentality of the woman narrator is a product of a long colonial history in which the English woman was higher on the hierarchy of race above both women and men who were colonial subjects although she may experience various manifestations of gender oppression as did the female subjects.

In contrast with this point of critique in her work stands a statement in her later essay *Three Guineas* which was published nearly ten years after *A Room of One's Own* and in which Woolf urges the reader to do the following,

You shall swear that you will do all in your power to insist that any woman who enters any profession shall in no way hinder any other human being, whether man or woman, white or black, provided that he or she is qualified to enter that profession, from entering it; but shall do all in her power to help them.<sup>76</sup>

It is again proven that if Woolf appears to be ignorant and prejudiced at certain points of her work, at other points she displays awareness of the need for equality and solidarity across the categories of gender, race and class. Here Woolf realises that as opposed to the rules of patriarchy, women should rise to prosperity without it being to the detriment of others. On the contrary, they should uplift each other in a communal effort.

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<sup>74</sup> Jane Marcus, *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Writing Race* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 2004) 73.

<sup>75</sup> Marcus, *Hearts of Darkness* 73.

<sup>76</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas* 63.

When it comes to treatment of the themes of race and Empire, there are several instances which stand out in Woolf's fiction. One of them appears in the opening scene of *Orlando* which shows the main character

in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters. It was the colour of an old football, and more or less the shape of one, save for the sunken cheeks and a strand or two of coarse, dry hair, like the hair of a coconut. Orlando's father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan . . . in the barbarian fields of Africa; and now it swung . . . in the breeze which never ceased blowing through the attic rooms of the gigantic house of the lord who had slain him.<sup>77</sup>

It is said that Orlando's noble ancestors "had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders" and that he aspires to follow their example. The opening passage is graphic and disturbing while also being written in a casual and good-humoured tone. Woolf intended the novel to be a light-hearted and entertaining writing project which is reflected in the tone of the prose. A sense of distance from the disturbing content of the scene is created by the tone and by the plot at this point being set in the distant Elizabethan period.

Not coincidentally with the strategy of tone and setting, Orlando is the only character belonging to the aristocracy that Woolf closely focuses on in her fiction. In her essay "Am I A Snob?" she divulges her interest in the aristocracy and being drawn to them. The aristocracy to her "seemed to have fewer sharp edges; the images she uses to describe them emphasize ease, sleekness, and unruffled exterior. . . . They exuded an air of confidence far removed from the ethic of striving."<sup>78</sup> In reference to Vita Sackville-West, an aristocrat who inspired the figure of Orlando, Woolf wrote that the aristocratic passions "become romantic to me, like old yellow wine."<sup>79</sup> This is how, despite the reality of the terror-infliction Orlando aspires to, Woolf is able to write about the character that, "There was a serenity about him always which had the look of innocence."<sup>80</sup> In the opening scene Orlando's innocence is indicated by the sense of play and the word "football." It is such light-heartedness and romanticisation

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<sup>77</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Penguin Books, 1965) 9.

<sup>78</sup> Zwerdling, 95.

<sup>79</sup> Qtd in Christine Fourinaies, "Was Virginia Woolf a Snob? the Case of Aristocratic Portraits in *Orlando*," *Woolf Studies Annual* 22 (2016): 21.

<sup>80</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 17.

which contributes to the normalisation of colonial practices and the dehumanisation of the Other. It is also notable that the portrayal of Orlando who as a member of aristocracy acts with impunity while also deemed adorable contrasts with the way the lower classes, who in her novels are mainly women, are often derided for their contempt-worthy existence and portrayed as grotesque.

Mentions of Empire often appear in Woolf's other novels but she rarely touches upon the treatment or perspective of the true victims of colonialism. Rather, the sense of Empire as an establishment looms in the background of the plot. In *The Waves* this is achieved in a very specific way as the characters are drawn together around the absence of a man who was implicated in the same establishment. The individual streams of the characters' consciousness are united by a common thread of thoughts about Percival who died in service in India. The men and women are infatuated with this fallen figure who becomes almost a myth, an idealised hero of grandeur. This seems to signify the beginnings of the Empire's disintegration and anticipate the ongoing nostalgia for it.

Although the man is fallen, his image as a hero is infallible and the civilising and reforming power he represents is recalled with nostalgic pride by the characters. At the same time, in the depiction Woolf uses irony and parody to "mock the complicity of the hero and the poet in the creation of a collective national subject through an elegy for imperialism."<sup>81</sup> The hero does not die a heroic death. He falls off a horse. Woolf's ridicule of the imperial grandeur is heightened by it being a "flea-bitten mare,"<sup>82</sup> but the characters' minds recount it with pathos, "'He is dead,' said Neville. 'He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown. . . . All is over. The lights of the world have gone out.'"<sup>83</sup> Woolf's treatment of Empire in *The Waves* is critical in often subtle ways.

Woolf shows how the orientalist civilising narrative is constructed, in this case by the poet Bernard. He narrates a vision of a cart in India getting stuck in the mud while "innumerable natives in loin-cloths swarm round it, chattering excitedly. But they do nothing. Time seems endless, ambition vain."<sup>84</sup> Then Percival appears, "By applying the standards of the West, by using the violent language that is natural to

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<sup>81</sup> Marcus, *Hearts of Darkness* 63.

<sup>82</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* 136.

<sup>83</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 114.

<sup>84</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 140.

him, the bullock-cart is righted in less than five minutes. The Oriental problem is solved." The natives regard him "as if he were – what indeed he is – a God."<sup>85</sup> Bernard's description of what constitutes Percival's mission is exalted and pathetic. Through it, Woolf parodies the image of the Western white saviour.

At the same time, her irony in the passage does not subvert the stereotype of the incapable native but rather perpetuates it. Patrick McGee sees modernist writing, including Woolf's, as symptomatic of "the lie of imperialism" which is centered on "the belief that Western culture is able to know itself from the outside, is able to produce its own self-critique without entailing the exclusion of others who have traditionally suffered from the construction of European subjectivities."<sup>86</sup> The problem is not only that the culture cannot see itself clearly but, and this relates to *The Waves*, it does not see the Other culture and its natives as relatable humans from whom a critique of Empire should come. Woolf may aim to critique the patriarchal organisation of the Empire but she does not proceed to truly criticise its impact outside of the context of Britain and see matters beyond its establishment.

The mockery of the coloniser is not juxtaposed with an empathetic view of the natives, the ones affected by the Empire the most, despite her choice to include them in the text. The novel is lauded for its lyricism, the technique of stream of consciousness and for constituting the height of her experimental phase but for her, allowing the Other to speak is unimaginable in a similar way that she cannot imagine the inner world of the members of the lower classes. However, the difference is that there is no indication that this bothered her in the same way as it did when it came to imagining the lower classes.

The native and their world in her fiction is either depicted as a very brief sketch of the uncivilised Other or as a lyrical image signifying a threat to the Western civilisation as when it is said that, "The waves drummed on the shore, like turbaned warriors, like turbaned men with poisoned assegais who, whirling their arms on high, advance upon the feeding flock, the white sheep."<sup>87</sup> Rather than irony, what comes across in similar passages is the indulgence in creating poetic imagery which

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<sup>85</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 140.

<sup>86</sup> Patrick McGee, "The Politics of Modernist Form; or, Who Rules *The Waves*?", *Modern Fiction Studies* 38.2 (1992): 641.

<sup>87</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* 59.

perpetuates the opposition of the West which is cultured, civilised and to be cherished, with the savage East.

Percival's death is juxtaposed with that of Rhoda who is not mourned like he is for she is not a hero and does not die for the country but commits suicide instead. Despite Rhoda's mental struggle, part of which is constituted by the impact of Percival's death, stretching out throughout the novel it is Percival's death that grips the mental and emotional centre of the other characters. Woolf points to the notion that some lives are more valuable than others. This critique is again not concerned with the Other but rather, it ties back in with her aforementioned reference to Lady Lovelace's concern in *Three Guineas* – it is British women who bear the burden of the Empire. For Woolf had not yet completely arrived at the point of primarily imagining the Other as equally human as herself, let alone the Other as a woman both like and unlike herself outside of any internalised colonial or orientalisating attitudes.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Empire is discussed as a matter-of-fact practical matter. It is implied that Peter Walsh works in the colonial administration in India and the focus is on his rather unsuccessful career. On his walk through London he wonders, "What did the Government mean – Richard Dalloway would know – to do about India?"<sup>88</sup> India is also a point of discussion at Clarissa's party which is attended by the Prime Minister and other political figures. *Mrs Dalloway* takes place solely in England and predominantly in London, the centre of the Empire. India is a distant entity to be dealt with. It is a part of Englishmen's career. The question is how to manage India well as a colonial outpost and the main concern in such management is for the British national interest. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf conveys how normalised Empire and colonialism are in the British culture without much critique. The novel, after all, centres on a woman who is oblivious to politics and the realities of other peoples, as has been demonstrated. She is complicit in the Empire in that she panders to those who administer it.

On the other hand, *To the Lighthouse* is more interesting in this regard. Among Woolf's novels, it seems to be one very removed from the reality of Empire. It depicts a holiday of the Ramsay family and their friends on the Isle of Skye. Therefore, the removal is physical and geographical but there are also no politicians nor colonial administrators. Nevertheless, references to the Empire pervade the novel.

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<sup>88</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 47.

In "Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, Aesthetics and Politics in *To the Lighthouse*" Urmila Seshagiri observes that Empire is applauded by the male characters while the female characters mock "narratives of colonial life and the Victorian reverence for national institutions."<sup>89</sup> At the beginning of the novel the Ramsays' youngest son James is found carefully "cutting out from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy stores,"<sup>90</sup> which as Carr points out is "the enterprise that specialised in providing the colonial establishment with the goods needed to maintain a civilised English life throughout the Empire."<sup>91</sup> The seemingly innocent image of James cutting out pictures from the catalogue illustrates that cultural and, as Woolf says, patriarchal conditioning of placing value upon the maintenance of Empire starts early on.

This image contrasts with that of the daughters of the family who strive to break away from the values of their parents, one of which is the reverence for the Empire. Instead, the three daughters harbour "infidel ideas" which include the refusal of "always taking care of some man or other" as well as the "questioning of deference and chivalry, of the Bank of England and the Indian Empire."<sup>92</sup> The daughters represent a new generation of a female collective forming their own manifesto which reflects Woolf's feminist values. Woolf here foreshadows some of what she is to explore in *Three Guineas* and hints at the fact that the critique of Empire is part of a feminist agenda.

She, however, points out that the daughters do not yet have any real transformative power for their deference is "mute." Women are portrayed as opting for such silent deference and compliance – as is the case of Clarissa Dalloway and the female characters in *The Waves*. Alternately, they attempt to join the male ranks of power and influence as is the case of Lady Bruton in *Mrs Dalloway*, who wishes she was a man as, "If ever a woman could have . . . ruled with indomitable justice barbarian hordes . . . the woman was Millicent Bruton."<sup>93</sup> While Lady Bruton longs to become a valued part of the patriarchal establishment, the new generation of women

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<sup>89</sup> Urmila Seshagiri, "Orienting Virginia Woolf: Race, Aesthetics, and Politics in *To the Lighthouse*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.1 (2004): 67.

<sup>90</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 7.

<sup>91</sup> Carr 197.

<sup>92</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 11-12.

<sup>93</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 160.

in *To the Lighthouse* prepares to resist it. Although the daughters have no real power as of yet, they have the transformative potential to grow into it.

## 2.5 Heteronormativity

Woolf's novels are subversive in terms of feminist thought in their often playful or casual refusal of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity can be understood as a form of bias built in within patriarchy which "demands a coherence of idealized morphologies, presumptive heterosexual desire and a thoroughly constructed gender binary."<sup>94</sup> In her writing, Woolf professes an interest in exploring non-heteronormative identities and relationships. In *A Room of One's Own*, she points out the discrepancy between the reality of such relationships and identities and the taboo attached to their representation as when she recalls the simple phrase "Chloe liked Olivia,"<sup>95</sup> which she had read in a novel by Mary Carmichael and subsequently urges the reader, "Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women."<sup>96</sup> Woolf reacts against the tendency to imagine women in relation to men rather than to each other especially in romantic contexts and in terms of desire and intimacy. She clearly strives to amend this in her own fiction.

In her novels Woolf sometimes hints at her characters not strictly fitting into the category of heterosexuality. As has been explored, a friendship and romantic attraction between two women appears in *Mrs Dalloway* between Clarissa and Sally. Woolf never approaches the theme as taboo, rather, her approach is light-hearted and casual and she thus contributes to its normalisation. Clarissa and Sally's relationship can be understood as a mere phase of confused infatuation experienced in their youth. After all, they both get married and the innocence of their kiss among cabbages hardly elicited any controversy among Woolf's contemporary readership.

However, Woolf does not reduce it to an insignificant affair of emotions. On the other hand, as has been discussed, some of the most emotionally intense stream of consciousness in the novel takes place when Clarissa thinks of this period of time. Her

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<sup>94</sup> María do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan and Antke Engel, "Introduction," *Hegemony and Heteronormativity: Revisiting 'The Political' in Queer Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011) 11.

<sup>95</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 95.

<sup>96</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 95.

and Sally's kiss is figured as "the most exquisite moment of her whole life."<sup>97</sup> Woolf's refusal of heteronormativity is impactful because it is matter-of-fact. She presents Clarissa's feeling to be as natural as any the character has had for a man. Despite conforming to the heteronormative value of marriage, the most important romantic moment of the character's life happens outside of it and Woolf takes care to convey this importance.

Furthermore, in the novel she mirrors this romance with the ambiguous relationship between Elizabeth and Miss Kilman. The romances may be failed but she stirs focus to their nuance, as has been touched upon in relation to the class difference between Elizabeth and Miss Kilman being problematic, rather than solely on the fact that they happen between women. Lack of nuance in representation of relationships between women was a part of her concern in her criticism of general tendencies in fiction, "All these relationships between women . . . are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted."<sup>98</sup>

In *To the Lighthouse*, it is the young artist Lily who escapes the heteronormative prescription of marriage which is being advocated by Mrs Ramsay. Lily feels relief in regards to avoiding marriage, "She had only escaped by the skin of her teeth, she thought. She had been looking at the tablecloth, and it had flashed upon her that she would move the tree to the middle, and need never marry anybody, and she had felt an enormous exultation."<sup>99</sup> This scene is typical of Woolf's tendency to correlate the resistance to patriarchal values with the enabling of women's creativity and self-actualisation. It is suggested that, "She might not have moved the tree at all if she had married and produced a house full of children."<sup>100</sup> Her development as an artist would have been stunted.

Despite reproaching Mrs Ramsay for trying to impose marriage on her, Lily cannot help but feel attraction to her. The following passage captures a tender moment between the two women which in its degree of intimacy surpasses any moment shared between a woman and a man in the novel,

Sitting on the floor with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay's knees, close as she could get, smiling to think that Mrs. Ramsay would never know the

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<sup>97</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 30.

<sup>98</sup> Woolf, *A Room* 96.

<sup>99</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* 237.

<sup>100</sup> Melanie Micir, "Queer Woolf," *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Jessica Berman (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2016) 350.



reason of that pressure, she imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which . . . would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. . . . What device for becoming . . . one with the object one adored? . . . Could loving . . . make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired . . . 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.

The romantic undertones of the passage are subtle. Lily poises herself on Mrs Ramsay's knees like a daughter might with her mother which image is supported by the age gap between them.

However, Woolf stresses the touch. Although Mrs Ramsay seems passive here, she is said to be touching Lily which suggest agency in the intimate moment. Further on, Lily's desire for becoming one with the other is presented explicitly. When Lily thinks of the desired she refuses that it could be defined by man-made language. Although "men" can be understood as referring to the mankind, the passage suggests that the communion between the two women exceeds the patriarchal heteronormative codes of relationships and mutual understanding.

It is clear that Woolf offers a lot of material which can be and have been viewed by critics through the lens of lesbian or more recently, queer reading. As Melanie Micir mentions, "The many versions of Virginia Woolf currently in circulation – feminist Woolf, lesbian Woolf, celibate Woolf, crip Woolf, and queer Woolf, among others – need not neatly align with one another."<sup>101</sup> Similarly, in her famous biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee points out that Woolf's work is constantly being reformulated by a variety of already constituted as well as emerging approaches and all of these reformulations can be valid.<sup>102</sup> As has been suggested, Woolf's work evades strict categorisation or definition and its versatility is due to it displaying varying levels of consciousness regarding different issues.

When it comes to subverting heteronormativity and presumptions about gender identity, *Orlando* remains the dominant point of focus of literary criticism in

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<sup>101</sup> Melanie Micir 352.

<sup>102</sup> Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 757.

terms of Woolf's oeuvre and shall be explored more in-depth in the following chapter through the lens of gender theory. The character has relationships with both women and men, there is ambiguity in regards to their gender identity and the central event is that of Orlando's casual sex change.

In "How to Do Things with Gender: Transgenderism in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," Stef Craps correlates Orlando's transition with the problematic of transgenderism.<sup>103</sup> The problem with the accuracy of such a correlation or appropriation of *Orlando* for transgender politics and representation is that the transition occurs spontaneously and Orlando has no desire for it nor is the character upset by it and his consideration and adaptation of a different gender identity is matter-of-fact – it is a consequence rather than the cause of the sex change as he had not identified as a woman prior to it. Nevertheless, the matter-of-fact nature of the transition can be seen as contributing to the destigmatisation of what has been understood as deviant by society. Yet again, it can be seen how Woolf's work complies with many labels and perspectives only partially.

Virginia Woolf has been held up as a feminist writer for quite some time. Her contribution to feminism and its popularisation seems indisputable, however, her position as an unconditionally revered feminist icon should be productively questioned and destabilised. Feminism has been developing since Woolf's time. The field it encompasses has been broadened and so should be the understanding of Woolf's feminism. A dominant concern in contemporary feminist trends has been that of redefining feminism to include all women as part of the critique of white and Western-centric feminism. The concept of intersectionality has been helpful in demonstrating that women are not a monolith and that the differences between them must be accounted for.

Woolf is naturally part of the early feminism many present-day feminist criticise, however, especially in her non-fiction she at points articulates the need for feminism to be inclusive of working class women as well as nonwhite women. These thoughts are scattered through her work and her feminist discourse is generally not

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<sup>103</sup> Stef Craps, "How To Do Things With Gender: Transgenderism in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," *Image Into Identity: Constructing and Assigning Identity in a Culture of Modernity*. (New York: Radopi, 2006) 180.

unified or well-formed but rather rife with contradictions and exclusionary rhetoric. These must be acknowledged and they have already been touched upon by several feminist writers who draw on but also challenge aspects of Woolf's feminist writings. In this sense, Woolf's position as a feminist figure remains relevant even today as her views have been built on and still invite the negotiation of issues pertaining to women.

Woolf was conscious of societal exclusion and oppression regarding class, race and imperialism and this can be reflected in her fiction, however, what also seeps in is her internalised prejudice. When it comes to representation, she mostly fails to extend her empathy to lower-class women and nonwhite people often affected by colonialism. Woolf at points acknowledges her shortcomings, especially in relation to her failure to relate to and faithfully represent the lower classes. It is clear that her main subject of interest are middle-class and upper-middle-class English women and that they in her imagination represent womanhood.

A contribution of Woolf's to feminist representation of women which must not be omitted is that which relates to the defiance of the patriarchal value of heteronormativity. She refuses the default notion of desire and intimacy as pertaining to heterosexual relationships and explores nuance in relationships between women. She explores the topic of sex change and destabilised gender identity although these in the case of Orlando cannot be easily conflated with the concept of transgenderism. Her non-confrontational and casual approach to these topics makes them accessible and contributes to spreading awareness of them.

### **3 Virginia Woolf and Movement towards Gender Theory**

As has been demonstrated, thinking and writing about women was important to Virginia Woolf. The category of "women," so crucial for feminist discourse, has been problematised by proponents of intersectionality and its complicated nature can be explored further through the lens of gender theory. The category of "women" remains relevant for feminist praxis and political representation. It then can hardly be completely dismissed, however, this does not mean that it should not be reevaluated.

Despite Woolf's interest in women and femininity and her often unproblematised use of these concepts, in her novel *Orlando* especially, in which the main character experiences a spontaneous sex change, Woolf questions the gender binary and points out its arbitrariness. Although gender theory had not been formulated in Woolf's time as it is now, it is of interest to view the tendency to question sex and gender roles in *Orlando* in a seemingly subversive way in light of contemporary gender studies, specifically Judith Butler's work. The aim is to examine whether such approach is unproblematic due to the possibly different understanding of terms and concepts related to the topic by Woolf as opposed to contemporary theorists or because the fantastical aspect of the novel might clash with the real.

Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* which draws and elaborates on her previous work, *Gender Trouble* in particular, is helpful in the contemplation of gender performativity, the constitution and regulation of sex and sexuality as well as the materialisation and materiality of bodies, which are all prolific themes in *Orlando*. Finally, it is also Butler who problematises the category of "women" from the point of view of gender theory.

#### **3.1 The Category of "Women"**

The universal nature of the category of "women" has been problematised by proponents of intersectional analysis such as Chandra Mohanty as was discussed in the previous chapter. Butler alludes to the same problem in *Gender Trouble* as well as in *Bodies That Matter* and she extends this critique in asking the following, "Is the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? And is not such a reification precisely

contrary to feminist aims?"<sup>1</sup> Butler suggests that the use of the category only upholds the gender binary and that there is a danger of perpetuating essentialism of gender<sup>2</sup> in its unproblematised use.

She writes that the presupposition of sexual difference is problematic as such view reifies it as

the founding moment of culture and precludes an analysis not only of how sexual difference is constituted to begin with but how it is continuously constituted, both by the masculine tradition that preempts the universal point of view, and by those feminist positions that construct the univocal category of 'women' in the name of expressing or indeed, liberating a subjected class.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, speaking of "women" remains useful and necessary for although the unified category of "women" may be a construct, it has tangible consequences in the material world. Butler herself acknowledges that speaking of and representing "women" cannot be simply abandoned when she states that, "The question never has been whether or not there ought to be speaking about women. This speaking will occur, and for feminist reasons, it must; the category of women does not become useless through deconstruction."<sup>4</sup> In representation and politics the category cannot be abandoned because, "The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside of this field."<sup>5</sup> There is, however, the need to examine how within this field certain norms and identities effected by such structures came to be established.

Butler values feminism but suggests that it should be transformed to include a new feminist politics "to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal."<sup>6</sup> It is then relevant not to understand the category of "women" as unambiguous in the social sense and to account for different aspects of women's experience and identities but it is also important to examine the

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 5.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge: 2011) 165.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 530.

<sup>4</sup> Butler, *Bodies* 5.

<sup>5</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 5.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 5.

establishment of the gender category itself. Such questioning of the constitution of the gendered subject appears in Woolf's *Orlando* and Butler's gender theory aids in its elucidation.

### 3.2 Sex and Gender as Constructs

The distinction between sex and gender has come to be known as that between a given, biological materiality and a social construct grafted onto it. However, Judith Butler presents arguments which complicate this distinction as she posits that both sex and gender are constructs. In *Bodies That Matter* Butler states that, "Sexual difference . . . is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices."<sup>7</sup> Butler refuses that sex is a static predetermined bodily condition but rather it is "a process whereby regulatory norms materialize "sex" and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms."<sup>8</sup> In her theory Butler heavily draws on Michel Foucault's concept of regulatory power which "produces the subject it controls" and which "is not only imposed externally, but works as the regulatory and normative means by which subjects are formed."<sup>9</sup>

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault expresses that, "Power is essentially what dictates its law to sex. Which means . . . that sex is placed by power in a binary system . . . Power's hold on sex is maintained . . . through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law."<sup>10</sup> Thus, the notion that sex can be simply reduced to a stable biological category is challenged in favour of seeing it and the body as produced and continuously regulated by power and its norms. Sexual difference is materialised in order to create and uphold the heterosexual imperative. Butler also terms this phenomenon as the "heterosexual matrix."<sup>11</sup>

When it comes to gender, according to Butler it is a discursive construct that manifests itself through performativity which is not a deliberate act but a citational

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xi.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xii.

<sup>9</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xvii.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. (New York: Random House, 1978) 83.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xxii.

practice produced by discourse.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, she suggests that gender absorbs and displaces sex rather than being in a constant relation of opposition to sex in that, "If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not accrue social meanings as additive properties but, rather, is replaced by the social meanings it takes on."<sup>13</sup>

The question of materiality and constitution of sex as well as the performative nature of gender roles are themes pertaining to Woolf's *Orlando*. However, it must be accounted for that the distinction between sex and gender was not as established in Woolf's time as it is now. This is why she predominantly uses the term "sex" even in passages in which it might make more sense to speak of gender and gender roles or gender performativity.

### 3.3 Gender and Sex in *Orlando*

Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography* may be seen as one of her less serious novels as it employs a playful approach to the genre of biography, includes fantastical components and does not lack in humorous tone. However, it also grapples with serious societal and personal issues such as identity, gender and sexuality although it appears to do so in a light manner. Orlando lives through four centuries, experiences a spontaneous change of sex and takes on several lovers of both sexes. Generally, through the presence and actions of the main character, heteronormativity, gender roles and their arbitrariness are questioned.

Published in 1928, the novel's provocative themes did not cause a controversy perhaps precisely because of its jovial tone and surreal features. As has been suggested, the defiance of heteronormativity in Woolf's other novels has not been seen as controversial because it is subtle. Some of the previously discussed scenes invite a two-fold interpretation. Due to their ambiguity it is hard to indict the novels for any offence as on the superficial level they can be seen as complying with the heteronormative imperative. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily's love for Mrs Ramsay can be seen as a young woman admiring a mother figure. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Sally and Clarissa's romance can be seen as a phase of youth followed on both parts by heterosexual marriages.

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<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Bodies xii*.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, *Bodies xv*.

In this sense, *Orlando* is subversive more explicitly as the character enters relationships with both men and women. Although these relations seem to be in accordance with the prescription of heterosexuality due to Orlando's sex change, his and other characters' gender identity is ambiguous throughout the story and furthermore, he is said to retain his experiences and feelings after his transformation. At one point, it is said that,

As all Orlando's loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to relate passages such as this one to the fact that the novel was published in 1928, only a few months after Radclyffe Hall's controversial novel *The Well of Loneliness* was persecuted for obscenity in regards to its straightforward exploration of lesbian love and desire. Woolf herself advocated for Hall's novel, offered to testify at the trial and was thus aware of the danger of writing about then controversial topics. Orlando's transformation is spontaneous and unexplainable, performed as if by a magic wand. It is a source of wonder, as are the physical, mental and emotional consequences of it. They are the result of a fantastical independent force which can hardly be a target of blame. They are portrayed in a light, almost exhilarated manner, which can hardly be attacked. Thus, *Orlando* evades censorship. Playfulness and fantastical aspects of the prose allow for the exploration of themes and perspectives which may otherwise be seen as controversial. The displayed hyper-awareness and continuous playful but pressing questioning and destabilising of the binary opposition of the male and female gender categories can hardly be overlooked in the study of the novel.

From the very beginning of the novel where the narrator describes Orlando's physical features, the focus on gender becomes apparent. At the opening of the novel Orlando is introduced as a boy. The first sentence goes as follows, "He – for there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it."<sup>15</sup> Commenting on this sentence in her essay "In the Breeches, Petticoats and Pleasures of Orlando," Nancy Cervetti writes that Woolf seems to be "creating

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<sup>14</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 113.

<sup>15</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 9.



the very doubt that her words would deny."<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler describes the way in which "sexual difference is often invoked as an issue of material differences,"<sup>17</sup> which is what Woolf seems to subscribe to – she seems to refer to Orlando's sex as being set through signs of materiality as it is obscured by attire. As has been pointed out, Butler sees the question of sex as much more complex and complicated.

However, Woolf sways the attention to the significance of clothes continuously to make a point as to what they have the power to indicate in terms of gender. Clothes are shown as closely related to gender, as speaking of gender. Notably, there has been a distinction between clothes marked as feminine and as masculine. The statement that Orlando's clothes are said to conceal his masculinity is the narrator's statement about the fashion of a different time, of the sixteenth century whereas the "present" is later revealed as the twentieth century. The clothes or even physical features seen as masculine or feminine in one century, and thus upholding a certain gender identity within the gender binary, might not be seen as such in another.

Thus, Woolf points at the arbitrariness of what signifies the masculine or the feminine and therefore to the constructedness of gender. She uses clothes to portray an outward influencing of the perception of gender and the enforcement of the gender binary, which becomes especially apparent after Orlando experiences the change of sex and becomes a woman. On the other hand, clothes are also presented as having the potential to obscure and suspend the determination of gender identity, albeit briefly and not in a stable way.

In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Butler writes that, "Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."<sup>18</sup> When Orlando first meets Sasha, his major romantic interest, he struggles to determine whether she is a man or a woman not only because her clothes are gender-neutral as she is wearing a "loose tunic and trousers of the

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Cervetti, "In the Breeches, Petticoats, and Pleasures of *Orlando*", *Journal of Modern Literature* 20.2 (1996): 166.

<sup>17</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter* xi.

<sup>18</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts" 519.

Russian fashion served to disguise the sex,"<sup>19</sup> but also because the stylization, features and manifestations of the body are ambiguous.

Orlando is torn in identifying the person as he thinks, "No woman could skate with such speed and vigour," as well as, "No boy ever had a mouth like that . . . no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea."<sup>20</sup> In these passages Woolf attempts to question the naturalised act of assuming someone's gender. She challenges the acceptance and even need of its institution to be able to classify a person as a specific gendered subject and consequently determine one's acceptable positioning in relation to them within what the heterosexual imperative. As the problem of gender performativity and sexuality becomes complicated after Orlando's sex transformation, it is logical to focus on the sex change itself prior to exploring the complication.

What is compelling about Orlando's sex change is that in a way it is very casual. He falls into a mysterious several-day-long sleep and when he wakes up, Orlando is found to have become a woman. Although the transformation itself is fantastical, it seems to aim at claiming a symbolic meaning. It is witnessed by the figures of Lady of Purity, Chastity and Modesty who stand in opposition to the figure of the Truth who proclaims Orlando to be a woman. The first three figures object to Orlando's transformation and its affirmation by the Truth.

Woolf may intend the personified Purity, Chastity and Modesty to embody values through which women and their bodies have been historically policed and repressed. Such values were prevalent in the Victorian era and survived until Woolf's adulthood. Woolf's critical stance on them and the related hypocrisy is expressed in the discussed passages of *Orlando* as well as in her other novels such as *Mrs Dalloway*. The allegorical figures can also be seen as a representation of the heteronormative imperative which does not allow for a subject to transgress the boundary of its established sex. Lady of Purity says, "On all things frail or dark or doubtful, my veil descends."<sup>21</sup> Lady of Chastity reveals that, "Where my eyes fall, they kill. Rather than let Orlando wake, I will freeze him to the bone."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 26.

<sup>20</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 26.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 95.

<sup>22</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 95.

The reaction of the Ladies to Orlando's transformation is to censor it and to attempt to kill him before he wakes as to prevent the reconstitution of him as a subject who explodes the gender binary. Orlando's body and persona which had been affected and marked by the experience and performance of maleness and which now, for the most part unchanged, threatens to encapsulate both the experience of being a man as well as a woman. He poses a threat to the authority of the heteronormative imperative and the regulatory practice which constitutes and maintains a sexed subject in its service.

The Ladies who embody the heteronormative ideal thus try to banish the existence of Orlando as an ambiguous body. Their stance can be seen as an effort to cast Orlando off as an abject body. When speaking about the creation of the corporeal subject Judith Butler writes that, "This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject."<sup>23</sup> The ambiguous body which does not fit in or comply with the heteronormative imperative must be cast off as abject. Butler suggests that to be abject means to be socially excluded, "The abject designates here precisely those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject."<sup>24</sup>

The Ladies panic at the prospect of Orlando's existence being validated by the Truth which would threaten their project and so they try to shun the Truth,

'Truth, come not out from your horrid den. Hide deeper, fearful Truth. For you flaunt in the brutal gaze of the sun things that were better unknown and undone; you unveil the shameful; the dark you make clear, Hide! Hide! Hide!' Here they make as if to cover Orlando with their draperies.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that they oppose the Truth makes their project suspect. In the end the Ladies do not succeed in suppressing Orlando's existence as they are expelled in favour of the Truth who affirms Orlando's existence as livable by pronouncing him as a subject, "We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xiii.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xiii.

<sup>25</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 96.

<sup>26</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 97.

Orlando thus emerges as a subject subversive to the regulatory process which produces sexed bodies. His transformation is an unknown, it is out of the norm and he does not clearly fit in the gender binary. His bodily presence becomes confusing, potentially undecipherable in a sphere delineated by norms which do not recognise such a presence. Butler describes that the category of sex "not only functions as a norm but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs."<sup>27</sup> It differentiates the bodies it controls. Orlando's transformation disturbs this type of regulatory norm and his body evades this control.

Such evasion is possible because as Butler goes on to explain, the materialisation of sex through this norm is sustained through its reiteration which betrays its weakness as "the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law."<sup>28</sup> The need for repetition of the regulatory norm creates the room for slippage as "gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm."<sup>29</sup> Orlando was "sexed" as a man but his transformation into a woman may be such a rearticulation or slippage revealing the fallacy of the regulatory practice.

Even if Woolf appears to challenge the normative constitution of sex as singular and once-and-for-all through one event instituted by the authority of the Truth, it is questionable whether this overcoming is real and whether it completely and successfully tears down the enforced systematicity of the regulation. One day, Orlando wakes up as a woman. His awakening after a long sleep is reminiscent of a birth in the way that he is pronounced to be a woman and also because the process of his constitution as such is unquestioned. The statement issued by the so-called Truth that, "We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman,"<sup>30</sup> can be seen as suspect. It is reminiscent of the very first sentence of the novel which pronounces Orlando to be indisputably a man. The determination of the sex through its pronouncement during birth and then various restatements of it represents the citation of the norm of sex.

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<sup>27</sup> Butler, *Bodies* x.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xi.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xix.

<sup>30</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 97.

The mirroring of the first sentence of the novel determining Orlando's sex by its re-determination later on as the other sex represents a certain cyclicity that Butler describes, "The norm of sex takes hold to the extent that it is 'cited' as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations it compels."<sup>31</sup> This may be seen as referring to two kinds of citational processes. In a sense, one of them is the reiteration of the norm after the establishment of a subject. The other, relevant to this passage, is that, the materialisation of one subject compels that of other subjects in a similar manner. Although Orlando retains his self when he becomes a woman, him being re-sexed as a woman reproduces a variation of the norm. It is its another citation. The statements pronouncing Orlando to be a man or a woman seem to be manifestations of the regulative norms which materialise sex. The figure of the Truth is then suspect of reinstating such a norm.

If, as Butler suggests, the pronouncement of sex is always a result of a normative process, the figure of The Truth becomes complicated. The figure then can be seen not as simply representing the concept of truth but the dependence of truth on the norms through which sex is established. The relation of truth to such norms is interesting because the norm never reveals itself to be what it is. Rather, the establishment of sex is presented as something pre-existing. However, in light of Butler's theory, what is seen as predetermined is really a product of norms.

This transformative event in itself is by no means the end of Woolf's exploration of the problematic of gender and sex. In the immediate aftermath of being pronounced a woman, the narrator continues to refer to Orlando by the masculine pronoun "he" until the following passage, "Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity."<sup>32</sup> The use of the pronoun "he" stresses the fact that Orlando retains his identity of a man despite the sex change. His identity and history cannot be erased. The pronoun "their" is used in transitioning from the use of "he" to "she" and suggests Orlando's evasion of the gender binary. The variation of the pronoun "they" opens up a space for containing multiple identities and the possibility of the fluidity of gender. The narrator adds that, "In the future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her'

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<sup>31</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xxii.

<sup>32</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 97.

for 'his' and 'she' for 'he.'"<sup>33</sup> The narrator suggests gender to be externally acquired or imposed rather than it being innate.

In commenting on this passage in the novel Kaivola states that it calls "the singularity of Orlando's identity into question, implying that human subjectivity is not reducible to a non-contradictory whole or consistently expressive of the sexed body."<sup>34</sup> The process of stumbling from one pronoun to another also demonstrates the agency behind the construction of gender. Sex and gendered identity are not natural facts but as Woolf's text straightforwardly points out, they are constructs.

At one point of the novel it is said that Orlando vacillates between being a man and a woman, "She was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each."<sup>35</sup> Orlando's oscillation suggests simultaneously a spontaneous change a fluctuation of gender identity and "perhaps more subtly and ambiguously, an alteration in sexual desire or object of choice."<sup>36</sup> Although Woolf does not distinguish between sex and gender in terms of terminology, it is necessary to make and retain the distinction for the present analysis.

After Orlando's transformation in Turkey and during her return to England, it is said that, "It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought."<sup>37</sup> Due to the transformation which changes her perspective, Orlando becomes aware of how the assignment of a certain sex by some ungraspable invisible process compels and pushes her to identify herself with the performance of the respective gender identity. This notion can be related to the aforementioned process in which gender absorbs and displaces sex. Butler writes that, "Gender emerges . . . as a term which absorbs and displaces "sex," the mark of its full substantiation into gender."<sup>38</sup>

On the journey home Orlando displays a growing awareness of the reality of gender roles and she realizes "with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position."<sup>39</sup> Although it may from the outset seem superficial, Woolf again uses clothes as one of the devices used to demonstrate this process. Travelling on a ship

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<sup>33</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 97.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Kaivola, "Revisiting Woolf's Representation of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality and Nation," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 18.2 (1991): 235.

<sup>35</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 112.

<sup>36</sup> Kaivola 235.

<sup>37</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 108.

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *Bodies* xv.

<sup>39</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 108.

Orlando realises that were she to fall overboard, her skirts would prevent her from swimming and she would have to rely on men to rescue her.<sup>40</sup> Thus, it is shown that there is a scheme within which women are set to be weak by certain discursively created norms of behaviour and consequently their lives are potentially dependent on the mercy of men.

On the other hand, Orlando realises that men's performance of masculinity bounds her as a woman to respond to it in a prescribed way, "That men cry as frequently and as unreasonably as women, Orlando knew from her own experience as a man; but she was beginning to be aware that women should be shocked when men display emotion in their presence, and so, shocked she was."<sup>41</sup> It is another instance which reaffirms the binary scheme of genders and their roles once again.

The aforementioned portrayal of vacillation between genders, however, is at certain points problematic. One way Orlando is implied to achieve it is by dressing both as a man and a woman. Within a single day Orlando is said to wear "a China robe of ambiguous gender," "knee-breeches" for gardening, "a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from some great nobleman," "a snuff-coloured gown like a lawyer's during her visit of the courts" and "when the night came, she would more often than not become a nobleman complete from head to toe and walk the streets in search of adventure."<sup>42</sup> Critical literature analysing Orlando and addressing gender tends to include references to Butler's concept of performativity and relates it to Orlando's use of clothes to perform either as a man or as a woman.

In commenting on Orlando's alternation of clothes according to different occasions, Nancy Cervetti refers to Butler, saying that, "Anticipating Judith Butler's claim that gender identity is a stylized repetition of acts through time, the novel demonstrates possibilities for gender transformation in the arbitrary relation of these acts and in their parodic repetitions."<sup>43</sup> However, it is paramount to acknowledge that Butler stresses that the performativity of gender identity is not a deliberate act. Therefore, the idea that Orlando could oscillate between genders by treating them as

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<sup>40</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 109.

<sup>41</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 127.

<sup>42</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 155, 156.

<sup>43</sup> Cervetti 168.

masks to be worn or removed at will is problematic, especially if presented as a practice which has the potential to subvert normative prescription of gender.

A similar understanding of gender as a phenomenon capable of certain fluctuation which is induced at an individual's will is more explicitly presented in Orlando's interaction with the Archduke. It is said that, "In short, they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse."<sup>44</sup> Through the reference to acting Woolf points out the constructedness of gender and its roles. However, the deliberateness of such an act is not subversive but ineffectual. Furthermore, the notion of a natural discourse referring to potential gender-neutrality is implausible within the discourse which determines and maintains the characters' gendered selves.

At times, Woolf's writing seems to affirm and invite the trend of understanding of gender which conflicts with Butler's viewpoint. Butler herself comments on the misreading of her own theory which stems from such understanding of gender:

The bad reading [of *Gender Trouble*] goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism . . . When my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, *presupposes* gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that “performativity” is not radical choice and it’s not voluntarism . . . Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms . . . This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in.<sup>45</sup>

It is apparent that in *Orlando* Woolf tries to work this trap. However, inevitably, she cannot really outsmart or overcome it although she may, on some

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<sup>44</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 126.

<sup>45</sup> Qtd in Liz Kotz, "The Body You Want: Liz Kotz Interviews Judith Butler," *Artforum* 31.3 (1992):88.



level, appear to do so in creating a character who in a fantastical manner is able to transcend the boundaries of the male and female sex and gender while retaining the knowledge of and claim to both sides of the binary. Nevertheless, the implementation of such knowledge and claim is futile when it is bound to individual and deliberate acts of wilful performance which in the end do not disrupt the normativity of what Butler calls "the trap."

Woolf, however, also demonstrates this inability to evade the implementation of prescribed gender norms in the latter part of the narrative as it moves into the nineteenth century. Orlando is perplexed by the fashion imperative of being expected, as a woman, to wear a crinoline as she is "dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted."<sup>46</sup> The description of the impact of the crinoline on Orlando implies its seriousness. It is physical and it bears on her mind: "It was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements . . . Her muscles had lost their pliancy."<sup>47</sup> The unwilling yet automatised way the adoption of the crinoline is performed implies a hidden force that compels Orlando to do so and stands in opposition to the singular nature of the acts of dressing as a woman or a man at will.

The crinoline may be seen as a superficial artifact of the Victorian age but it also represents a norm which, like other women, Orlando must adopt and be formed and modified by. It has a psychological impact on her which is unnamed but depicted as felt and it has a straightforward physical impact in that it alters the matter of her body – her muscles. A similar pressure to assume a certain performance is that of a physical "tingling"<sup>48</sup> which induces Orlando to marry and which really represents a societal and discursive pressure. This compulsion feels almost innate to Orlando, which is why it is pursued, and yet it is felt to be perplexingly unnatural. In accordance with what Butler implies, it seems that the existence of Orlando as a subject presupposes the process which in turn shapes the subject – therein lies the cyclicity of the prescriptive gender norm.

Overall, Woolf's novel shows that gender should not be defining of a human character and yet it significantly determines human life, for as Butler says, it is a

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<sup>46</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 172.

<sup>47</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 172.

<sup>48</sup> Woolf, *Orlando* 171.

result of a power which regulates bodies and their social meaning. In *Orlando* Woolf shows a human who does not strictly fit the gender binary and who thus defies the heteronormative imperative through his sex change, vacillation between the gender identities and ambiguous sexual preferences. The character's ambiguity may be a symptom of the failure of the normative reiterative process. Butler's theory is helpful for understanding how sex and gender must be produced and maintained which are processes manifested in *Orlando*.

Despite the constant slippage and ambiguity, when Orlando becomes a woman what strongly comes across is the way she is more constricted than when she was a man. This is in terms of her body, behaviour that she is compelled to adopt and in terms of the law which almost prevents her from retaining her property. This part of the novel truly conveys the real impact of gender performativity and the way it is not deliberate, which is a major claim put forward by Butler. It is shown that societal forces are persistent in the imposition of the gender binary which, after all, cannot be completely disrupted.

Woolf's novels offer many opportunities to analyse the author's stance on and representation of women. Among her novels, it is *Orlando* that questions what it means to be a woman or a man within the heterosexual matrix. *Orlando's* message aligns with trends in recent gender theory which does not intend to discard the gender categories but to challenge them. In *Orlando* the writer from the outset creates an atmosphere of ambiguity surrounding the topics of sex and gender while also pointing out the often unquestioned and set nature of the construction of it. Her exploration of the topic is naturally intuitive and anecdotal but can be interpreted through the lens of Judith Butler's theoretical work. Woolf illustrates how not abiding by such set preconceptions creates a sense of disturbance or panic. This ensues when a character evades being gendered or with the event of disruption of the reiterative determination of Orlando's sex.

Woolf seems to intend the slippage from such a normative regulation to be subversive but also shows the threat of Orlando being cast off as an abject body which is to be denied validity or even existence because of its unintelligibility. The intended subversion also seems to lie in the triumphant reaffirmation of the character's existence and identity as true but paradoxically it is done through the same scheme of citationality of the restrictive norm which the text attempted to explode.

What also seems subversive is Orlando's ability to encapsulate various gender identities at the same time. However, these liberatory scenes and ruminations can at certain moments be doubted. At some points, Woolf portrays the performance of gender as something deliberate and thus autonomous and liberating. Nevertheless, in accordance with Butler's refusal of this concept, the development of the narrative also shows that the reiteration of gender norms is a trap which cannot truly be evaded as Orlando's mind and body are continuously driven into compliance and performance of the prescribed acts of femaleness after being gendered as a woman. As a result, the novel's role in destabilising preconceptions about and compliance with the heteronormative gender binary is indisputable. The same is true of challenging the unproblematised notion of predetermined materiality of sex. The fantastical aspect of the text is crucial in allowing for such a perspective to be accessible.

All in all, the ambiguous representation of gender identity of Orlando and other characters challenges preconceptions about gender and sex as stable and predetermined and provokes the reader to think about the concepts and their consequences. The text contributes to the unmasking of heteronormativity, destabilisation of its authority and to the affirmation and normalisation of non-binary gender identities. The aspect of ambiguity opposes the predominant attitude of not questioning the categories of gender and sex. Subsequently, the novel raises awareness about the way gender norms and gender performativity shape and define human life.

## Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's novels and non-fictional works are famously concerned with women's private and internal lives, their position in society as well as their representation in itself. In her writing, Woolf is highly conscious of the context of patriarchal values and narratives and she writes to disrupt them. Woolf has been perceived as an important feminist writer within the domain of Western culture and her relevance as such persists even today. Since her times, however, feminism has significantly progressed and developed into various branches.

It seems apt to ask how Woolf may have foreshadowed aspects of certain ideas and concerns of present-day feminism and relatedly of gender theory in her works. It is also necessary to consider how her feminism can be productively challenged and revised in the light of these trends and her work interpreted through them. The point of interest is to see in what ways her gender consciousness and representation is subversive of patriarchal narratives, values and norms and where it falters in terms of progressive representation of women.

One of Woolf's interests was that of revolutionising the language and technique of literary narratives in a way that would better encapsulate and express women's experience and inner lives. This need stemmed from feeling stifled by the constrictions of narratives the rules of which had been historically predominantly established by men within a culture in which their voices were deemed superior to those of women. The idea of a woman's sentence which originated from these concerns bears similarity to Hélène Cixous's idea of *écriture féminine* which also aimed to establish new forms of expression in opposition to the phallogocentric order.

What is presented as valuable in Woolf's novels are imagination, creativity and a form of playfulness which unravel in her female characters' minds. These are contrasted with the rational and educated thinking of the male characters in her novels which is presented as inaccessible, dull and restrictive. In her texts Woolf values emotional intelligence over strict rationality. The latter is not in need of any more affirmation or upholding within society. In this aspect Woolf's writing coincides with that of Cixous who condemns the idea of valuing thinking in structures and classifications as superior. Cixous's stance is helpful in articulating how the male perspective is always more valued within patriarchy and how this should be resisted.

Cixous stresses the importance of the body and desire for women's self-expression. Women should write through their body, be in touch with it and at the same time writing is a tool to reclaim power over one's body. It has been noted that Woolf's focus in her novels is on exploring the mind more than the body, however, she mentions that writing should somehow be adapted to the form of the body. With her technique of stream of consciousness Woolf creates safe textual spaces to voice women's concerns and desires. She conveys their epiphanies of body and mind where the narrative style mirrors the content. She lets her characters to escape their designated social roles in allowing them to find refuge in and explore their selves and inner voices.

Bodily sensation figures in these liberating moments but the way Cixous determines the body as the ultimate site of liberation appears problematic in its exclusion of women who have difficult relationship with their body. In this sense, Woolf's approach is less radical and more inclusive than that of Cixous as she also realistically portrays women who dissociate from their body or who are exhausted by the performance of their social roles while also trying to sustain creativity. Cixous also does not sufficiently account for the sociopolitical context of women's lives and the differences between women which are aspects that appear and must be accounted for in the analysis of Woolf's representation of women and of her feminism. Nevertheless, style and narrative strategies in Woolf do function as an opposition to the dominance of phallogocentrism and of established narratives regarding women's lives and thinking.

Outside of her novel writing Woolf's concern regarding the unfavourable position of women in society manifested in her participation in several women's organisations as well as in her essays and lectures. Woolf was aware of the discrepancies between women and men but also between women of different social classes. Despite being sympathetic, she also displayed prejudice towards the members of the lower classes both in her private and professional writing. In the past several decades, her famous piece *A Room of One's Own* has been particularly criticised by feminist writers for its central claim that intellectual freedom and a creative career such as that of a writer is viable only for those women who are already financially secure. This stance is exclusive of the majority of women in Woolf's time. Her statement becomes all the more problematic with the realisation that the lifestyle

Woolf proposes is often enabled by employing servants who are predominantly women as was Woolf's case.

Woolf has been regarded as an important figure in the history of feminism but it must be stressed that this is within the context of white middle-class and Eurocentric or Western feminism. Such feminism is not useful to the majority of women which is why there has been a revision of her non-fictional feminist texts. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality by which she denotes the way different categories of identity intersect has been gaining recognition in recent decades and must be accounted for in all feminist discourse if it is to be all-encompassing and inclusive when it comes to women.

Writers such as Crenshaw and Mohanty point to what has always been true – that women are not a monolith. Despite her classist and racist comments in her private writing or her exclusionist rhetoric in *A Room of One's Own*, at different points in her non-fictional writing Woolf displays awareness of differences between women and the need to advocate for all kinds of women. However, this is not a continuous thread in her writing and does not dominate her feminist concerns.

In her novels Woolf predominantly portrays white middle-class and upper-middle-class English women. Their portrayal is complex and sympathetic and she explores their inner lives. On the other hand, lower-class characters who in her novels are mainly women are portrayed as grotesque caricatures, often presented as incoherent and repugnant, with no trace of complex interior lives. This tendency goes curiously against her call for representation of obscure lives, meaning especially lower-class women whose voices and lives had not been historically represented well-enough.

Woolf was also critical of the Empire as a patriarchal establishment. She mocks the civilising narrative and the Western saviour figure. However, her criticism largely centers on the Empire as affecting and being detrimental to English women. Members of the colonised populations are vaguely mentioned in her novels but never developed as characters. Their image is reductive and although Woolf includes them in scenes which seem critical of the establishment, they are still figured as the unrelatable primitive Other. In other instances the native is depicted through a poetic image expressing the juxtaposition of the East and West. Woolf attempts to relate to the Other even less than she does to the British lower classes and her self-awareness is lesser in this regard. This is largely manifested by the fact that she focuses more on

the impact of the Empire on English women rather than on the women native to the colonised lands whom she sees as a part of a vague mass.

Despite Woolf having a very narrow focus in terms of what kind of women she chooses to write about, among the positive aspects of that representation is her challenge to the patriarchal demand of heteronormativity. In her novels Woolf resists the demand of compulsory heterosexuality by exploring intimacy and desire between women and shows that women's emotional lives are not necessarily primarily centered around men. In *Orlando*, Woolf takes the challenging of heteronormativity even further by questioning the relevance of the gender binary. Through the employment of ambiguity *Orlando* questions the meaning of decoding people's gender identities in establishing relationships with each other and treats them as arbitrary. Judith Butler's theory is helpful in articulating how sex and gender function as constructs and how gender performativity affects human life which are all themes reflected in *Orlando*. In the novel Woolf shows that human character is not defined by gender and shows the concept of the gender binary and related heteronormativity to be confining and insufficient in encompassing all human experience. It reveals the categories of sex and gender as unstable in their need of reiteration.

However, despite the claim of Orlando's vacillation between being a man and a woman after the sex change, what strongly comes across is the character's feeling of being constricted in multiple ways when he becomes a woman. *Orlando* shows that even if gender is a construct, it has real material consequences in society which persists in the imposition of the gender binary and the heteronormative imperative. The novel is important in unmasking these concepts for what they are and challenging the dominant understanding of them as something predetermined or natural. It also shows how even basic philosophical concepts such as truth are dependent on the heteronormative conception of sex and gender. Despite the fact that feminism and the category of "women" were important and necessary for Woolf as they are now, in this novel she portrays the need to question sex and gender categories and their establishment which is what Butler encourages to do today.

Although Virginia Woolf's work can be seen as contradictory in terms of her ideas about women and her approach intuitive, her writing can be related to recent feminist trends which contribute to its understanding. It must be stressed that Woolf's views are at points problematic and her feminism from a contemporary perspective can be seen as largely exclusionary. Nevertheless, Woolf herself recognised that she

was not infallible and invited revision of her work. Her role as a feminist writer remains important in her contribution to the popularisation of ideas regarding the bettering of women's position within society as well as expanding the possibilities of women's experience being recorded in fiction with its various complexities. Despite her faults Woolf has contributed to expanding the general consciousness regarding gender issues as well as advocating for the creation of spaces for women in society and in literary representation.

The thesis contributes to the discussion of Woolf's oeuvre in its synthetic approach which focuses on the analysis of Woolf's most prominent novels. It connects three important theoretical approaches – *écriture féminine*, intersectional feminism and gender studies. The thesis relates gender to the categories of race, class and imperialism which have not been typically considered in feminist analyses of Woolf's work. It also handles the problematic of gender and transsexuality in *Orlando* in a new manner, using Judith Butler's theory of performativity.



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## Thesis Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to analyse Virginia Woolf's novels and non-fiction in light of several recent trends in feminism and gender theory relevant to her work. The thesis considers Woolf's label of a feminist writer from a contemporary perspective. It examines a variety of ways in which her writing poses a challenge to patriarchal values regarding the treatment and representation of women. Woolf's position regarding gender issues, women and feminism is not monolithic or unified which must be accounted for. At points, some of her stances can be seen as problematic from a present-day feminist perspective. At the same time, in her work she raises concerns which have been relevant for and expanded by proponents of contemporary feminism and gender theory. The thesis focuses on three areas regarding gender awareness and representation in Woolf's work. They are her narrative style, the sociopolitical context of her work and the questioning of gender categories. Woolf's narrative style and strategies are viewed in light of *écriture féminine* as conceptualised by Hélène Cixous. Through her manner of writing Woolf aimed to disrupt established ways of narrating women's experience. Her concept of the woman's sentence can be seen as foreshadowing *écriture féminine*. Apart from her style, Woolf's development as a feminist is traced. The socio-political context of her gender awareness and representation is considered through the lens of intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which is necessary for inclusive feminism. Considering Woolf through the lens of intersectionality stems from criticism of exclusionism in Woolf's feminist writing by several contemporary feminist writers. Finally, the thesis analyses Woolf's questioning of the gender binary and the heteronormative imperative through the lens of Judith Butler's gender theory. Despite the fact that the category of "women" is important to Woolf, she comes to question its implications. Thus, the thesis presents a complex view of gender consciousness and representation in Woolf's work. The thesis starts focus to relevant aspects of Woolf's most prominent and experimental novels. It explores *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Orlando*. In terms of her non-fiction, *A Room of One's Own*, *Three Guineas* and a variety of her essays and diary entries are considered.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, gender, women, feminism, patriarchy, écriture féminine, intersectionality, gender theory, heteronormativity, performativity

## Abstrakt práce

Cílem této práce je analyzovat romány a eseje Virginie Woolfové z pohledu současných trendů ve feminizmu a genderové teorii, které jsou pro daná díla relevantní. Diplomová práce zvažuje označení Woolfové jako feministické spisovatelky ze současné perspektivy. Práce zkoumá různé způsoby, kterými se autorčina tvorba staví proti patriarchálním hodnotám souvisejícím s přístupem k ženám a jejich reprezentací. Stanovisko Woolfové k otázce genderu, žen a feminizmu není jednotné nebo sjednocené, což musí být bráno v potaz. Někerá její stanoviska mohou být místy vnímána jako problematická z pohledu dnešní feministické perspektivy. Zároveň však její tvorba poukazuje na témata, která jsou relevantní pro současný feminizmus a genderovou teorii. Práce se zaměřuje na tři oblasti související s povědomím o genderu a reprezentací v dílech Woolfové. Jsou jimi její vypravěčský styl, sociopolitický kontext jejích děl a zpochybňování genderových kategorií. Narativní styl a strategie Woolfové jsou nahlíženy ve světle *écriture féminine* neboli ženského psaní, které bylo popsáno Héléne Cixousovou. Woolfová svým způsobem psaní zamýšlela rozvrátit ustavené způsoby vyprávění o zkušenostech a prožitcích žen. Její koncept ženské věty může být vnímán jako předchůdce *écriture féminine*. Diplomová práce kromě jejího stylu mapuje vývoj Woolfové jako feministky. Sociopolitický kontext jejího povědomí o genderu a její reprezentace žen jsou zkoumány v rámci intersekcionality. Tento koncept, který je nezbytný pro inkluzivní feminizmus, byl poprvé představen Kimberlé Crenshawovou. Rozebírání díla Woolfové z pohledu intersekcionality navazuje na kritiku nedostatku inkluzivity v jejích feministických spisech, kterou prezentují některé současné feministické autorky. Práce nakonec analyzuje autorčino zpochybňování genderové binarity z pohledu genderové teorie Judith Butlerové. Přestože kategorie žen je pro Woolfovou důležitá, zkoumá její negativní důsledky. Diplomová práce tedy prezentuje komplexní pohled na povědomí o genderu a jeho reprezentaci v dílech Woolfové. Práce se zaměřuje na relevantní aspekty nejvíce prominentních a experimentálních románů Woolfové. Zkoumá romány *Paní Dallowayová*, *K majáku*, *Vlny* a *Orlando*. Z její literatury faktu se zaměřuje na *Vlastní pokoj*, *Tři guineje* a na řadu esejů a deníkových záznamů.

Klíčová slova: Virginia Woolfová, gender, ženy, feminismus, patriarchie, écriture féminine, intersekcionalita, genderová teorie, heteronormativita, performativita