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Sketching the Child: Gendered Narratives of Childhood in Virginia Woolf's Fiction

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to investigate the gendered narratives of childhood in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), and her memoir "A Sketch of the Past" which was written between 1939 and 1940. In both these works, the figure of the child is given centrality while investing it with social, psychological, aesthetic and cultural significance. And this literary representation of childhood offers a space where Woolf explores and interrogates various narratives of gender and sexuality. It is also important to see how Woolf portrays both the male and the female child as an archetype of the artist figure who engages with different expressions of art.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, childhood, gender, masculinity, imperialism.

This paper is an attempt to investigate the gendered narratives of childhood in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), and her memoir "A Sketch of the Past" which was written between 1939 and 1940. In both these works, the figure of the child is given centrality while investing it with social, psychological, aesthetic and cultural significance. And this literary representation of childhood offers a space where Woolf explores and interrogates various narratives of gender and sexuality. It is also important to see how Woolf portrays both the male and the female child as an archetype of the artist figure who engages with different expressions of art. But before moving further into the discussion, it would be useful for us to locate childhood as a discourse within the larger context of Modernism itself.

In the context of British literature, the emergence of literary childhood can be traced back to the Romantic age where it finds expression in the poetry of Blake and Wordsworth. For instance, Blake gives us the archetype of the child of innocence who is tragically forced to enter the world of experience. With the Victorian novelists, the figure of the child re-emerges particularly through the genre of the bildungsroman novel and finally with the advent of Modernism and also with the Freudian intervention, a new discourse of childhood surfaces. From the Romantic archetype of the innocent child, there is a new psychoanalytical model of childhood based on the theories of psycho-sexuality, repression and Oedipal conflict. Hope Howell Hodgkins argues that the elitist bias of high Modernism fails to re-invest in childhood or to represent the consciousness of children (Hodgkins 357). He connects this sense of Modernist disinterestedness to its aesthetic situation. "High modernism is adolescent (not

childlike) in spirit...eager to challenge the adult establishment and scornful of recent childish pasts" (Hodgkins 358). In other words, we can then think of the Modernist aesthetic as a manifestation of anti-Romanticism and anti-Victorianism. By offering a close reading of some of the canonical Modernist novels by Woolf and Joyce, Hodgkins observes how the authors approach the question of childhood from the vantage position of their adulthood. This then problematizes the question of authenticity in the textual representation of childhood. However, my own attempt in this paper would be to argue that the portrayal of childhood especially in Virginia Woolf's writings invoke the earlier Romantic paradigm of childhood. In the manner of Wordsworth, Woolf sees childhood in terms of artistic possibilities. At the same time, the figure of the child allows her to offer a critique of patriarchal codes and structures. Woolf's *The Waves* can serve as an entry point to explore this argument at length.

Can *The Waves* be seen as a re-working of the bildungsroman genre? How does Woolf explore the relationship between childhood, language and time? And finally, how does the novel thematize and interrogate gendered narratives of childhood along the socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity? In order to address these questions, I would offer a close reading of the first two sections of the novel where the experiences of the children are interwoven through a series of poetic monologues.

In the first section, the six characters are portrayed in their early childhood and Woolf poetically captures their relationship to the world of nature. In fact, there is a strong undercurrent of Romanticism in the novel where the world of nature, especially the fluid movement of waves, suggests eternity despite the ever changing phases of life, its transient moments, chaos and flux of sensations. Even the intensely lyrical interludes that preface each of the sections are loaded with images that suggest a natural flow of time where the present moment soon vanishes into the past, the harmony of childhood loses itself into a painful loneliness of adulthood, and the certainty of life is blurred by the awareness and presence of death. For instance, the first interlude captures the scene of early dawn: "The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky". What we see here is the fusion of contrasting images and elements, the sea and the sky, of light and darkness, of static and the fluid. In other words, the early morning is symbolic of childhood itself where it is possible to achieve a kind of harmony. In the opening section, the children respond in different ways to the auditory, visual and tactile sensations that they receive from the world around them.

As mentioned before, the question of the bildungsroman becomes crucial especially in relation to childhood. In some ways, *The Waves* can be read as Woolf's re-working of the bildungsroman novel even while she experiments with narrative, genre and language. There are significant ways in which the six characters develop during the course of this novel but at the same time, unlike the traditional bildungsroman, Woolf debunks the linear trajectory of growth and development. Even as children, the characters are endowed with immense maturity with intense psychological depth. Even the mature, self-conscious and poetic language that the children speak would seem atypical. This can be read as Woolf's attempt to destabilize the boundary between childhood and adulthood. The qualities that the characters acquire during their childhood remain with them even in their later phases of life. For instance, Bernard's love for words and phrases is sustained till the last section of the novel

whereby he is able to transcend the fear of mortality. Woolf's depiction of childhood anticipates what Chris Jenks argues from a sociological standpoint. Childhood is to be understood not just "as a stage" or "a structured process of becoming" but also as a "coherent social practice" (Jenks 9). In other words, childhood is a social construction that provides "an interpretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life" (Jenks 50). As Jenks further elaborates, a sociological paradigm of childhood should be able to view children as active agents in the construction and determination of their personal, inter-personal and social lives (Jenks 51).

In the first section of the novel, the space of the class room receives narrative centrality as it allows the characters to portray their inner lives, desires and ambitions. Louis is self-conscious of his Australian accent, his inferior class position and he constantly imitates Bernard whom he sees as a model of perfection. Susan, on the other hand, is identified with nature and fluidity as she says "Those are white words, like stones one picks up by the seashore." Jinny, on the contrary, sees words as extension of her own sensuality - "those are yellow words, those are fiery words." Neville seeks in words a desire to create order and meaning. For Bernard, words have a life of their own, words that "flick their tails right and left....moving all together, now dividing now coming together." But Rhoda, on the other hand, is constantly tormented by her sense of failure and inability to respond to words and language, as she says "But I cannot write. I see only figures." Among the six characters, Rhoda comes across as the most vulnerable and alienated.

Both Bernard and Rhoda seem to represent two contrasting aspects of Woolf herself. Bernard seems to represent Woolf's own struggle to create meaning in her life through art and language, whereas Rhoda becomes the embodiment of silence and terror in Woolf's own personal life. Bernard can also be read as an extension and alter ego of Woolf herself who constantly experiments with language and form. Rhoda, on the other hand, is completely removed from the sphere of language. Even the classroom becomes a traumatic space for her. In fact, the six characters can be understood as symbolic fragments of Woolf's inner life and desires. *The Waves* then becomes Woolf's attempt to reconcile the disparate moments of her life such as maternity and art, solitude and love, pain and catharsis. Through the classroom scene, Woolf draws a relationship between childhood, the formation of self, and the formation of language within the institutional setting. Perhaps it is an attempt to draw our attention to the inner mindscape of a child and the way he or she approaches language in a highly subjective manner as opposed to the rigid, external worldview imposed by the school. However, the gender politics of the novel in its treatment of childhood and adolescence demands critical investigation.

While the male characters are allowed different forms of artistic expression- be it through language or poetry- the female characters remain enclosed within the archetypal models of femininity. Susan is identified with nature, maternity and fertility where as Jinny represents the body and its sensuality. And then in the light of these female characters, how does one explain Rhoda's alienation and her failure? Chloe Taylor observes that the male characters in *The Waves* have been equipped with artistic resources to manipulate language where as the female characters are made to either accept the "laws and conventions of language (Jinny), or

reject it entirely and be silent (Susan), or hesitate and risk going mad” as seen in Rhoda’s case (Taylor 62). Taylor uses Julia Kristeva’s theoretical paradigm of the semiotic and the symbolic in her analysis of the three female characters in *The Waves*- Jinny, Susan and Rhoda. According to Taylor, Susan represents the woman who identifies with the maternal and “rejects language, or the paternal, while Jinny represents the phallic woman” who rejects the maternal and embraces the symbolic order of patriarchy (Taylor 61). Rhoda, on the other hand, represents the woman who occupies a liminal space between the paternal and the maternal but eventually chooses the maternal and henceforth death (Taylor 62). In other words, by extending Kristeva’s theory, Taylor argues that Rhoda reflects Woolf’s own predicament as a female author who constantly struggles with language and madness.

In the context of gendered representation of childhood, Neville’s character also demands critical attention as throughout the novel, he debunks conventional masculinity. There is an interesting scene in the first section where Neville associates the apple tree with death. This is also reminiscent of an episode in Woolf’s memoir *A Sketch of the Past* where as a child, Woolf associates an apple tree with the memory of a suicide. In other words, the relationship between the inner and outer world of the child becomes the focal point. Later in the novel, Neville would yet again confront the same reality of death and transience in the most painful way after the passing away of Percival. At the same time, it is art that finally allows him to transcend his agony and emerge as the poet-artist figure, the embodiment of love itself.

The second section of the novel takes us to the adolescent phase of the characters. The school once again occupies a centre stage as all six of them express their anxieties and ambitions, their hopes and fears. Bernard is dissatisfied with the “tremendous and sonorous” words of his Headmaster while Neville rejoices at the rhythm and structure of Latin language. Louis is terrified by the impersonal/alienating character of London coupled with the class snobbery at school. Even Susan feels terribly homesick and Rhoda sees herself to be completely stripped of identity. She says “I am nobody. I’ve no face....We are all callous, unfriended.” This critique of authority comes across as a recurrent theme in Woolf’s fiction be it patriarchal, national, imperial, rational or medical. Even in “A Sketch of the Past”, we can see Woolf’s critique of the patriarchal authority embodied in her own father. As a child, she herself found the social norms of an upper, middle class Victorian family to be extremely detrimental to the creative and artistic growth of a girl child.

It is important to see how in the second section Woolf creates multiple images of the artist figure. Bernard is seen as the story-maker/weaver/teller. To cite an interesting line from Neville’s monologue- “Like a camel, a vulture. The camel is a vulture; the vulture a camel; for Bernard is a dangling wire, loose but seductive....” In other words, Bernard is the quintessential Modernist. In his childlike, playful use of language, he has de-stabilized the signifying function of words. In a profound moment, Neville expresses “Among the tortures and devastations of life is then- our friends are not able to complete their stories.” It becomes a self-reflexive moment where Woolf constantly explores the difficulty of writing itself. Can a work of art be complete? Is there an absolute narrative closure? But in the manner of Lily Briscoe’s painting in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves* too ends with a moment of

artistic vision with Bernard's epiphany. "It is death. Death is the enemy. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding."

Coming back to the question of masculinity and childhood, Percival is introduced as a crucial character in the novel. We do not get to see or hear him yet he is introduced by the other characters, as though he is present through his absence. He serves as an emblem of not just memory and desire itself, but also of an ideal British heterosexual masculinity which is further tied to the imperial project. In fact, the contrast between Neville and Percival represent the contrast between the two modes of masculinity. While Percival embodies a kind of dominant masculinity, Neville de-stabilizes heterosexual masculinity. As defined by R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, masculinity is "not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action" (Connell and Messerschmidt 836). In other words, Percival subscribes and fits into a code of "hegemonic" masculinity sanctioned and institutionalized through the public school, and later in the novel, Percival's masculinity would be connected to the imperial project itself. In many ways, the novel's narrative seems to suggest that Percival represents the fantasy, mystery and power built around the idea of British imperial heroism defined in relation to colonized spaces such as India. As a counterpoint to Percival's ideal masculinity, Woolf lends a voice to same sex desire through the figure of Neville. Debunking conventional hetero-normative desire, Neville's unrequited love for Percival allows him to create art.

The game of cricket with its national, patriarchal subtext operates as a significant trope in the novel. Both Neville and Louis reject a kind of a sport culture that is associated with a normative masculinity in the school curriculum. As Louis says "How majestic is their order, how beautiful is their obedience....But they also leave butterflies with their wings pinched off." Yet again, I would like to draw attention to a subtle connection drawn between cricket and imperialism. As discussed by Paul Dietschy and Richard Holt, a central element of the historical agenda of sport in Britain has been imperialism. They also cite J.A. Mangan's work on the "ideology of athleticism" in the public schools and how this ideology is connected to a process of "producing manliness... in the service of Darwinism, militarism and imperialism" (Dietschy and Holt 91). One can link this idea to the question of Percival and imperialism. Even as a child, Percival is shown as a larger than life, confident, heroic figure. He becomes the reference point around which the other characters judge and interpret their own lives. But then how does one explain the death of Percival later in the novel? Though there is silence and ambiguity built around Percival's death, yet through the event of his death Woolf seems to have de-mystified the imperial vision. One should also note how there is also a shift in the heroic figure. It is Bernard, the story-teller, who finally controls the narrative and emerges as the artist-hero ready to conquer death in a sublime and mystical sense.

The representation of childhood in *The Waves* is loaded with strong gender and even imperial narratives. On the one hand, the child figure experiences artistic possibilities while on the other hand, he or she is also constrained by institutional forces. While Susan, Jinny and Rhoda negotiate with structures of language and patriarchy, Neville, Louis and Bernard make attempt to subvert the conventional models of masculinity imposed by the national and

the imperial project. The second segment of this paper would shift the focus towards Woolf's memoir "A Sketch of the Past" in an attempt to show how her own childhood experiences are loaded with anxieties about the performance of gender roles.

In "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf's literary treatment of her own childhood is endowed with spiritual and mystical elements. This is evident from her own philosophical notion of the "moments of being" or those moments that transform the mundane into the magical. During moments of being "the self is transcended and the individual consciousness becomes an undifferentiated part of a greater whole" (Schulkind 18). This idea of wholeness as opposed to a sense of fragmentation is central to Woolf's literary and aesthetic project. Just as *The Waves* begins with the children's responses to various sensations, even "A Sketch of the Past" records Woolf's growth as an artist and her visions that came from her encounter with various colours, sights and sounds. In other words, moments and memories are tied together in this memoir. She describes three crucial moments which are central to her memories of childhood. The first instance was her experience of patriarchal violence when she was beaten by her brother Toby. Instead of fighting back, she endured the pain, coming to terms with her sense of powerlessness. But this gesture becomes significant in the context of Woolf's idea of pacifism. In the memoir, we see how she offers a critique of the emotional and psychological violence that lie at the heart of the conservative, Victorian family. Woolf also recounts her experience of sexual abuse which she suffered as a child. But that moment of abuse also becomes a moment of self-awareness and self-recognition of the rights she owns over her own body.

The second memory pertains to the scene of a flower and how it evokes a feeling of wholeness in young Virginia's mind. And the third instance is regarding an apple tree and how it brings up a memory of a person's suicide, also then reminding us of the Neville episode in *The Waves*. In other words, Woolf describes the element of "shock" that serves as an artistic resource. "I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer" (Woolf 72). Jeanne Schulkind observes how Woolf's use of memory in reconstructing those moments of being brings out her affinity with William Wordsworth (Schulkind 21). In fact, Woolf blends the different time frames in her memoir. Her Victorian childhood past constantly interacts with her present moment situated in the turbulent times of the Second World War. Experiences of death and instability dominate much of Woolf's childhood memories yet she also uses her memories to offer critique of gender structures especially through her portrayal of her mother Julia Stephen and her sister Stella, the two central protagonists in the memoir.

Though both Julia and Stella were confined within the Victorian domestic space, they had significant roles to play within their family life. In fact, the mother-daughter relationship is explored with great complexity in the memoir. The death of her mother signifies the most traumatic moment of rupture and discontinuity in Woolf's childhood. We also see how Woolf vehemently critiques the Victorian masculinity and patriarchy embodied in her father Leslie Stephen whose Cambridge intellectualism fails to provide emotional support and security during moments of crisis. Woolf also describes the strained relationship with her half brother George and how the daughters in the family suffered limited access to social and economic

privileges. Regarding George, she writes how he constantly failed to “enter the intellectual machine” yet he enjoyed the privilege of the “social machine” (Woolf 153).

To conclude, childhood and the gendered constructions of family life emerge as central themes in “A Sketch of the Past.” The novel as well as the memoir engage with questions of childhood and adulthood, of life and death. The narrative in *The Waves* begins with childhood, and death then becomes the final narrative destination. However, death is transcended just as Clarissa Dalloway’s party in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) celebrates life despite the suicide of Septimus Smith. Like all the other Modernists, Woolf was anxious of transience, she was intrigued by memory and desire, yet she found order and meaning in the world of art. On the summer of 28 March 1941, Woolf’s decision to drown herself was equally significant. It was her last and final engagement with death, not in the textual but in the real, corporeal sense.

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