

# Virginia Woolf's Gendered Language

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**Abstract**—According to Julia Kristeva, women feel the separation from mother as a lack. This lack, the anguish of separation from the mother can be best expressed by silence and repetitions. Kristeva also states that the best period for self-expression for women is the time of the semiotics stage when the subject is alone with the mother in her womb. Circular form of narration, repetitions and silence constitute the best forms of expression for women. Celebrated novelist Virginia Woolf employs language as a major tool for providing insight into the identities of characters. However, the characters' identities are fluid and never fixed, hence language conveys this ambiguity. Drawing on the theories of Julia Kristeva, this paper aims to examine Woolf's use of language to express especially female feelings, thoughts and sentiments in five of her novels (*The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Orlando*).

**Index Terms**—Communication, gender, Julia Kristeva, language, Virginia Woolf<sup>1</sup>.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the theories of Julia Kristeva, this paper aims to examine Virginia Woolf's use of language to express especially female feelings, thoughts and sentiments in five of her novels (*The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Orlando*). Like the famous psychoanalytical critic Kristeva, Woolf emphasizes the importance of silence for women. Starting with Chaucer's tale of Griselda, many works of literature have depicted the importance of silence as a major tool for the empowerment of women. Kristeva states that women feel the separation from mother as a lack. This lack, the anguish of separation from the mother can be best expressed by silence and repetitions. Kristeva also states that the best period for self-expression for women is the time of the semiotics stage when the subject is alone with the mother in her womb. Circular form of narration, repetitions and silence constitute the best forms of expression for women. For Woolf, language is a major tool for providing insight into the identities of characters. However, the characters' identities are fluid and never fixed, hence language conveys this ambiguity. In the same vein, Kristeva observes that the subject is always in a state of becoming.

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<sup>1</sup>“Words, English words are full of echoes, of memories, of associations. They have been out and about on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties of writing them today — that they are stored with other meanings, with other memories, and they have contracted so many famous marriages in the past.” (Woolf: “On Craftsmanship, 1-44”).

## II. THE VOYAGE OUT

*The Voyage Out* is the first novel where Virginia Woolf examines the role of language in human life. The novel examines the journey of Rachel Vinrace from England to South America. In doing that, the novel also traces Rachel's voyage out from home to society and inward towards her identity and self. Woolf was aware of the difficulty of expressing feelings, emotions and reality through language. Drawing attention to the narrator of *The Voyage Out*, Galbati stresses that Woolf interferes with and gives detailed descriptions of characters, settings and events. The author “attempts to supplement the narrator's voice by establishing an interaction between it and the voice of all the characters” [1]. Besides being a tale about a group of people who travel from London to Santa Marina, the novel also tells the story of Rachel Vinrace's spiritual development. In fact, she seems to be the only character in the novel who shows a capacity for genuine self-development.

It is significant that Rachel feels a deep attachment to her mother and later to Helen whom she identifies as her mother. Throughout her life, Rachel tries to overcome the dualism in her nature; she also tries to overcome the social limitations imposed on her gender and at the same time indulge herself in the pleasures of nature. In the novel, Helen symbolizes the Earth Mother. She is associated with vegetation [2]. “She was working at a great design of a tropical river, running through a tropical forest, where spotted deer would browse upon masses of fruit” [3]. When she is dancing, her movements are likened to the graceful movements of a deer.

In depicting Rachel's devotion to her mother, Woolf reflects the deep bond between the girl child and her mother as well as the girl's anguish when she experiences separation from the mother. When Rachel talks with Hewett, she explains her deep feelings for her mother: “my mother was the person I cared for and now Helen”. “Oh Terence the dead, my mother is dead” [4]. As Kristeva observes: “a mother is a continuous separation, a division of language — and it has always been so” [5]. Kristeva further suggests that because women are excluded from the socio-symbolic system, they react with an attempt to “shatter language, to find a specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnamable repressed by the social contract” [6]. The child learns the language of the body that will connect her to the myths, nature, and mothers of all periods from the mother. This is the sacred language.

According to Jennifer Lemma, Kristeva's “defense of motherhood, particularly her discussion of the sacredness of maternal love and the mother tongue strengthens the argument that motherhood is a primary means of preserving language acquisition and ethical development” [7]. Kristeva states that women have been excluded from the men's world, the world of symbolic order. Language acquisition is

acontinuous process and “The economy of this system requires that women be excluded from the single true and legislating principle, namely the Word, as well from (always paternal) element that gives procreation a social value; they are excluded from knowledge and power” [8]. As I have already suggested, silence is an important tool of expression for Woolf. In her analysis of Woolf’s use of language in *The reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, Patricia Lawrence observes that “Woolf confronts the narrativity of silence and the cultural constraints of her time — “the unsayable”, something not sayable based on the social taboos of Victorian property or something about life that is ineffable” [9].

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf depicts a character who is fundamentally out of tune with society. Unable to communicate effectively with words, Rachel feels that death may be a way of communication. Through the portrayal of Rachel, Woolf critically examines the difficulty of putting feelings and ideas into words. At first, Rachel Winrace thinks that the World is unruly and chaotic. Later, as she becomes more experienced in the book, she decides that life can be calm and certain. As E.L. Bishop observes: “She finds it difficult to put either perception into words and the problem arises as much from the uncertain nature of reality as it does from language” [10]. Love makes human beings more aware of the meaning and depth of words. Bishop further suggests that “As Rachel reads a passage from Gibbon, even the unexotic words become intensified. Never had any words been as vivid and so beautiful—Arabia, Felix, Aethiopia” [10]. Before she read “With the curious literalness of one to whom written sentences are familiar, and handling words as though they were made of wood, separately of great importance, and possessed of shapes like tales or chairs” [10].

Woolf aims to give intensity and depth to language. In the words of Nikolchina: “Kristeva asserts that language, already as a semiotic chora but above all as a symbolic system is at the service of the death drive. Language is the terrain of deathwork” [11]. Rachel and Terence cannot express their feelings adequately with words. They can only repeat each other’s words. Thus, both feel deeply the inadequacy of words to express feelings effectively. As Hewet maintains: “And then one never knows what anyone feels. We are all in the dark. We try to find out, but can you imagine anything more ludicrous than one person’s opinion of another person? One goes along thinking one knows; but one really doesn’t know” [12]. It is ironic that death allows both the reader and the couple, Rachel and Hewet, to find a solution to the problem of communication. In the words of Hewet: “We want to find out what’s behind things, don’t we? — Look at the lights down.” He continued, “scattered about anyhow. Things I feel come to me like lights... I want to combine them..... Have you ever seen fireworks that make figures... Is that what you want to do?” [13].

It is after Rachel’s death that Hewet feels a kind of peace that he hadn’t experienced when Rachel was alive. “An immense feeling of peace came over Terence, so that he had no wish to move or speak....he seemed to be Rachel as well as himself; and then he listened again; no she had ceased to breathe. So much the better—this was death. It was nothing, it was to cease to breathe. It was happiness, it

was perfect happiness. They had now what they had always wanted to have, the union which had been impossible while they lived” [14]. Nye observes: “Kristeva cites such heterogeneous things as groans, childish babbling, rhythm, and rhyme in poetry, delirium, psychotic construction. All this, Kristeva says, is the language of desire, evidence of the pressing of drives that can never logically, never be represented in objective language” [15].

Kristeva associates Sun with the father. She observes that “The sun a paternal image that is to be coveted but also feared, murderous and sentenced to die, a legislative seat which must be usurped” [16]. As Foster observes “For women the Symbolic means awareness of the self as a subject constituted through an alien because logocentric and phallogocentric discourse, which depends on preordered naming and categorization. Entry into this state thus destines woman to a position in which she is linguistically marginalized, rendered inactive or mute in speech as well as in social signification. The only way to overcome this verbal suppression is to speak through a language not dominated by the phallus” [17].

Kristeva observes that the chora precedes everything that is symbolic, a place of rhythm and movement. She observes: “The chora as rapture and articulations (rhythm) precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality. Our discourse—all discourse—moves with and against the chora. In the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it. Although the chora can be designated and regulated, it can never be definitely posited: as a result, one can situate the chora and if necessary lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form” [18]. As Selda Peksen observes: “Even if women do not attempt at creating a language that comes from the chora, yet sometimes, there are eruptions of the semiotic in the symbolic order. These eruptions are mainly poetic such as silences, contradictions, ambiguity, rhythm, music, meaninglessness and deviations from the grammatical rules” [19].

### III. *MRS. DALLOWAY*

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s concept of androgyny is presented through the figure of Richard Dalloway. Woolf believed that people, especially artists should be androgynous - sensitive like a woman and reasonable like a man. Mrs Dalloway observes: “No one understood until I met Richard. He gave me all I wanted. He’s man and woman as well” [20]. *Mrs. Dalloway* was written in Woolf’s mature stage and it examines the problems of communication. Throughout the novel, silence serves as an important means of communication. Clarissa and Septimus look into each other’s eyes and experience a moment of epiphany. Septimus can not put his feelings into words. He can only imagine the scenes that have affected him. He remembers Evans, his best friend who was blown to pieces by stepping on a mine, and yet he cannot put his feelings into words. He shouts: “Evans don’t come!” which makes no sense to others. Likewise, Masie Johnson wants to shout. “horror” “horror” yet she cannot. The same words are repeated by Clarissa when Sally kisses her and she sees the stars but this precious moment is interrupted by men who join the group. Between Peter and Clarissa there is such a

bond that they have no need for words to communicate: "They went in and out of each other's minds without any effort" [21].

In *Mrs. Dalloway* Clarissa contemplates the suicide of Septimus and the chiming of Big Ben best reflect her feelings: "The clock was striking, the leaden circles dissolved in the air" [22]. Similar to other novels, death is presented as the ultimate form of communication: "Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center which mystically evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death" [22]. In Woolf's novels men are often depicted as hindrances to communication. Septimus and Clarissa often meditate on the loneliness of human beings. People are lonely and yet they cannot do anything about it. Septimus who returns from war psychologically maimed observes: "Septimus repeated to himself. Once you fall, human nature is on you, Holmes and Bradshaw are on you. They scour the desert, they fly screaming into the desert" [23]. Laughter is another means by which people share a moment of connection. Rezia and Septimus share such a moment when Rezia is sewing a hat for one of her customers and Septimus is in one of his rare good moods, sharing a joke with his wife.

Woolf uses "free indirect style" as her choice of expression in the narrative. "While moving inside the character's consciousness to take on the style, and tone of their own immediate speaking voice", the narrator reflects the feelings, thoughts and speech of a character [24]. This technique allows the reader to judge and form his own ideas about characters without the guidance of the narrator. Foregrounding the complexity of human nature, Woolf chooses silence and reflection instead of words to communicate the characters' thoughts and feelings. When Peter suddenly visits Clarissa before her party, she is so excited but can not express her feelings with words. "Exactly the same, thought Clarissa: the same queer look, the same check suit, a little out of the straight his face is, a little, dryer, thinner, dryer perhaps, but he looks awfully well and just the same" [25]. But what she pronounces in words is just "it's heavenly to see you". Peter Walsh finds her older but doesn't express this in words.

Similarly, language is inefficient to express Richard Dalloway's thoughts and feelings about Clarissa. He loves his wife deeply, knows very well that she chose him over Peter Walsh and feels grateful for that. But he cannot openly tell her that he loves her. So instead he brings her red roses and she understands: "But how lovely she said taking his flowers. She understood; she understood without his speaking; his Clarissa" [26].

#### IV. TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

Kristeva observes that women's time is cyclical. In her words: "As for time, female subjectivity would seem to provide specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations. On one hand there are cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm, which conforms to that of nature and imposes a temporality whose stereotyping may shock, but

whose regularity and unison with what I experienced as extra subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnamable jussiance" [27]. The middle section of *To the Lighthouse*, the "time passes" section, reflects Kristeva's cyclic time in which human agency is absent. One feels the passage of time with the cyclic passage of days and seasons: "Night after night, summer and winter, the torment of storms, the arrow — like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference. Listening (had there been anyone to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning could have been heard tumbling and tossing" [28].

As Goldman observes: "In this part, "time passing" is represented as cyclical repetition than as the multiple story lines or criss-cross networks —to the past and to other places —of a day. Natural rhythms take precedence over the appeal to any kind of progression or linear development" [29]. The characters in *To the Lighthouse*, convey the difficulties of communication. Coming to the house they all share, Lily observes: "What does it mean then, what can it all mean?...for she could not, the first morning with the Ramseys contract her feelings, could only make a phrase resound to cover the blackness of her mind until the vapours had shrank. For really, what did she feel, come back all these years and Mrs Ramsey dead? Nothing, - nothing she could express at all" [30].

Vigina Woolf has a specific way of using language to express the consciousness of characters. Saunders names this as "unclaimed consciousness" [31]. The consciousness of the characters merge so that it is difficult for the reader to identify and differentiate clearly between the consciousness of different characters. For example, when James is speaking, the reader notices that with James there is a shift in the point of view. James wouldn't use words such as "the exaltation and the Sublimity". Likewise, in the descriptive passage about Mr. Bankes, the narrator is depicting Mr. Bankes in a special way. It can not be reflecting Mr. Bankes' feelings, ideas: "Mr Bankes feels rigid and barren, like a pair of boots, that so has been soaked and gone dry, so that you can hardly force your feet into them" [32]. In the following passage, it is difficult to identify whose consciousness it is that remarks, the narrator's or Mr. Bankes': "How did she manage these things in the depths of the country [Mr. Bankes] asked her. She was a wonderful woman" [33].

On the other hand, Mrs. Ramsey in *To The Lighthouse* finds that it is silence and light that best reflect her feelings. She is depicted with the words: "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. And it would lift up on it some little phrase or other which had been lying in her mind like that "Children don't forget" "children don't forget." which she would repeat and begin adding to it, It will end, it will end, she said. It will come, it will come, when suddenly she added, We are in the hands of the Lord" [34].

#### V. THE WAVES

*The Waves* examines communication between six friends who try to resist temporality and spatiality. Woolf decided

about the form of the novel in 1930. While taking a walk with her friend Lydia, the author fell down and was taken to her room. She barely recalled anything: "So this is what sudden death feels like" she said. She decided that the form of the novel would comprise a series of "dramatic monologues". In *The Waves*, Woolf stresses the importance of communality. Each character is separate and yet united in his/her desire to be a whole. Percival is the character who doesn't speak and yet unites them all. In other words, they unite in their love of Percival. These friends also articulate a uniting language of their own. Each character is different, unique and yet aims to connect with others.

In *The Waves*, Woolf tries to create a common consciousness out of the consciousness of six characters. Their common love for a dead, silent character, Percival unites the consciousness of six close friends. Time passes, their lives diverge and yet instead of language the love for their common friend serves as a strong bond of communication between friends. The characters search for silence. They need silence to realize their identity, to feel the passage of time and to take stock of their lives. Bernard observes: "I need silence, and to be alone and to go out, and to save one hour to consider what has happened to my world, what death has done to my world.....The machine then, works; I note the rhythm, the throb, but as a thing in which I have no part, since [Percival] sees it no longer" [35]. There is no direct conversation between the characters but a soliloquy.

*The Waves* aims to depict the changing lives of six friends who were once very close but eventually go their different ways after their college years. The friends separate when a part of the group (Neville, Bernard, Percival) decide to go to Cambridge. The sun rises and sets, days, years pass, reflecting the changes time brings to the lives of these close friends. Louise sums up their situation with the following words: "We have come from all parts of the world, from South, from North, from Susan's farm, from Louise's workplace, to continue something that doesn't continue, because what continues, to see it from different perspectives" [36].

The friends lead different lives. What Susan expects from life is love and motherhood, Jenny lives a life of freedom, sexuality and love whereas Rhoda cannot enjoy life. Neville searches for harmony and peace in life. Bernard gathers all his friends on the occasion of Percival's departure to the Indies. As Allison Hild observes, language is an important tool for Woolf to show symbolically the relationship between the six friends. They resemble a flower: "a single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purplish shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves- a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution" [37]. Here, instead of a conversation, symbolism of the flower serves to shed light on the relationship of the six (seven with Percival whom we don't meet).

Repetitions in *The Waves* serve as a vehicle for communication when words don't suffice. Susan's relation to life is centered around her home and baby. The repetition of the words "sleep, sleep" reflects the monotonous pattern of her life: "Sleep, I say sleep, as the kettle boils and its breath comes and its breath comes thicker and thicker

issuing in one jet from the spout. So life fills my veins. O life pours through my limbs" [38]. Louis observes, "For one moment only,..... before the chain breaks, before disorder returns, see us fixed, see us displayed, see us held in vice" [39]. In the fifth part of the novel, their friend Percival dies and friends once again feel the finality of death, its power.... Both as adolescents and later, as grown ups they talk about the power of death. They also see death at a carnivalesque scene. "Death is woven with the violets," said Louis, "Death and again death" [40]. Louis also remarks that death has a finality. He observes: "Percival has died he died in Egypt. He died in Greece; all deaths are one death. Susan has children. Neville mounts rapidly to the conspicuous heights. Life passes. The clouds change perpetually over our houses, I do this, do that, and again do this and then that. Meeting, and parting, we assemble different forms, make different patterns" [41].

When they are get older, they each realize that their lives had turned out to be rather different than what they expected. Bernard, for instance, realizes that he will never be a famous author. He observes: "A phrase, an imperfect phrase? And what are phrases? They have left me very little to lay on the table, beside Susan's hand; to take from my pocket, with Neville's credentials. I am not an authority on law, or medicine, or finance, I am wrapped round with phrases, like damp straw" [42]. Rhoda, on the other hand, is unhappy, she cannot establish true relationships with people. She longs for company and yet rejects them. She reflects the feelings that had led her to attempt suicide as a child. These sensations resemble Woolf's own feelings that eventually led to her madness.

Near the end of the novel the repetition of words give a certain depth to meaning that would otherwise elude the reader. "Drop upon drop" said Bernard, silence falls. It forms on the roof of the mind and falls into pools beneath. For ever alone, alone, alone, hear silence fall and sweep its rings to the farthest edges. Gorged and replete, solid with middle aged content, I, whom loneliness destroys, let silence fall, drop by drop" [43]. Language is what unites and separates us. The five novels I examine in this paper foreground the difficulty of communicating with the language of the symbolic system shaped by the language of patriarchy. Hence, like Kristeva, Woolf favours a woman's language represented by silences repetitions, murmurs that reflect woman's connection to nature. Kristeva stresses that the spoken word provides a reference point, the possibility of measurement, as female language through essential female subjectivities, "retains repetition and eternity from, along the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations" [44].

## VI. ORLANDO

In *Orlando*, Woolf's deals with androgyny in more depth. As Elizabeth Wright maintains: "Androgyny for Woolf was a theory that aimed to offer men and women the chance to write without consciousness of their sex- the result of which would ideally result in uninhibited creativity" [45]. Carolyn Heilburn, on the other hand suggests that "Androgyny for Woolf meant not homosexual, lesbian or bisexual but simply, fully human" [46]. Woolf herself observes that "the

woman is surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization she becomes, on the contrary outside of it, alien and critical" [47]. The figure of Orlando satisfied Woolf's desire of being a mother and at the same time excelling in the masculine profession of an author. The protagonist Orlando lives a long life that stretches from the Elizabethan age to the Edwardian age. During this time she changes her sex and hence can experience both the life of a man and a woman

Virginia Woolf took the profession of writing very seriously. She further believed that a writer should possess both feminine and masculine characteristics. As she observes in *A Room of One's Own*: "It is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" [48]. Woolf felt particularly oppressed during the Victorian age. In *Orlando*, the protagonist, voices this oppression Woolf felt as a female author: "Orlando had inclined herself naturally to the Elizabethan spirit, to the restoration spirit, to the spirit of the eighteenth century, and had in consequence scarcely been aware of the change from one age to the other. But the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to her in the extreme, and thus it broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands as she had never been before" [49].

At the start of the novel, Orlando is a young and handsome noble who meets queen Elizabeth, flirts a lot and later falls in love with a Russian princess called Sasha who eventually leaves him and returns to Russia. After being ridiculed by the poet Nick Green from whom he was expecting encouragement on the poems he had written, Orlando has an affair with a Romanian Archduchess, but when she expects a permanent relationship with him, he runs away from town all the way to Constantinople, where King Charles appoints him ambassador. At this point, Orlando changes gender and becomes a thirty year old woman Archduchess Harriet finds Orlando, but this time it is her turn to change gender and she assumes the identity of Archduke Harry and declares his love for Orlando. But Orlando rejects him and comes to London to where she meets Marmaduke Shelmerdine and marries him. Orlando suffers a lot under oppressive social conventions but tries to negotiate his way by acquiescing to the demands of the system.

According to Kristeva: "In women's writing language seems to be seen from a foreign land; as it is seen from the point of view of an asymbolic, spastic body. Virginia Woolf describes suspended states, subtle states and above all colours-green, blue, - but she does not dissect language as Joyce does. Estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak" [50].

In *Orlando*, Woolf also foregrounds the importance of changing clothes. She observes "For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is opposite of what it is above" [51]. In this sense, clothing cannot accurately convey the sexual identity of the individual that wears it. As Lanham suggests "Androgyny,

then, is a refusal to choose. The androgynous vision is practical, not dichotomous. It affirms a "fertile oscillation" between positions" [52]. From this perspective, androgyny is a liberating state that allows for the free flow of sexual energies.

To conclude perhaps one can say that nervous illnesses and especially silence have been depicted as woman's particularity. In certain cases illness and silence can inspire the creative writer. Woolf observes on her illness: "I believe these illnesses are in my case-how shall I express it- partly mystical. The mind totally shuts itself up, it refuses to go on registering impressions, it becomes a chrysalis. The suddenly a change comes, Something springs, and this is I believe the moth shaking its wings in me. Then, I begin to make up my story, whatever it is" [53]. As Nikolachina observes silences may vary also "A silence that kills, a silence that calls, a silence that shuts itself up like a chrysalis in which new stories shake their wings" [54].

## VII. CONCLUSION

In brief, Virginia Woolf employs various alternatives (such as silence and repetitions) to verbal communication in *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To The Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Orlando*. One of Woolf's favorite themes is lack of communication which exacerbates the profound loneliness and isolation of the human being. Since communication is an indispensable tool for the exchange of ideas and feelings, the breakdown of communication inevitably leads to alienation and paralysis. In this sense, real intimacy between human beings who cannot express themselves effectively is not possible. Deeply concerned with this problem, Woolf tries to articulate a different gendered language that is more appropriate for the expression of women's emotions but that also widens the scope of communicative exchanges between both genders.

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